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THE MAGAZINE OF

# Fantasy & Science Fiction

NOVEMBER

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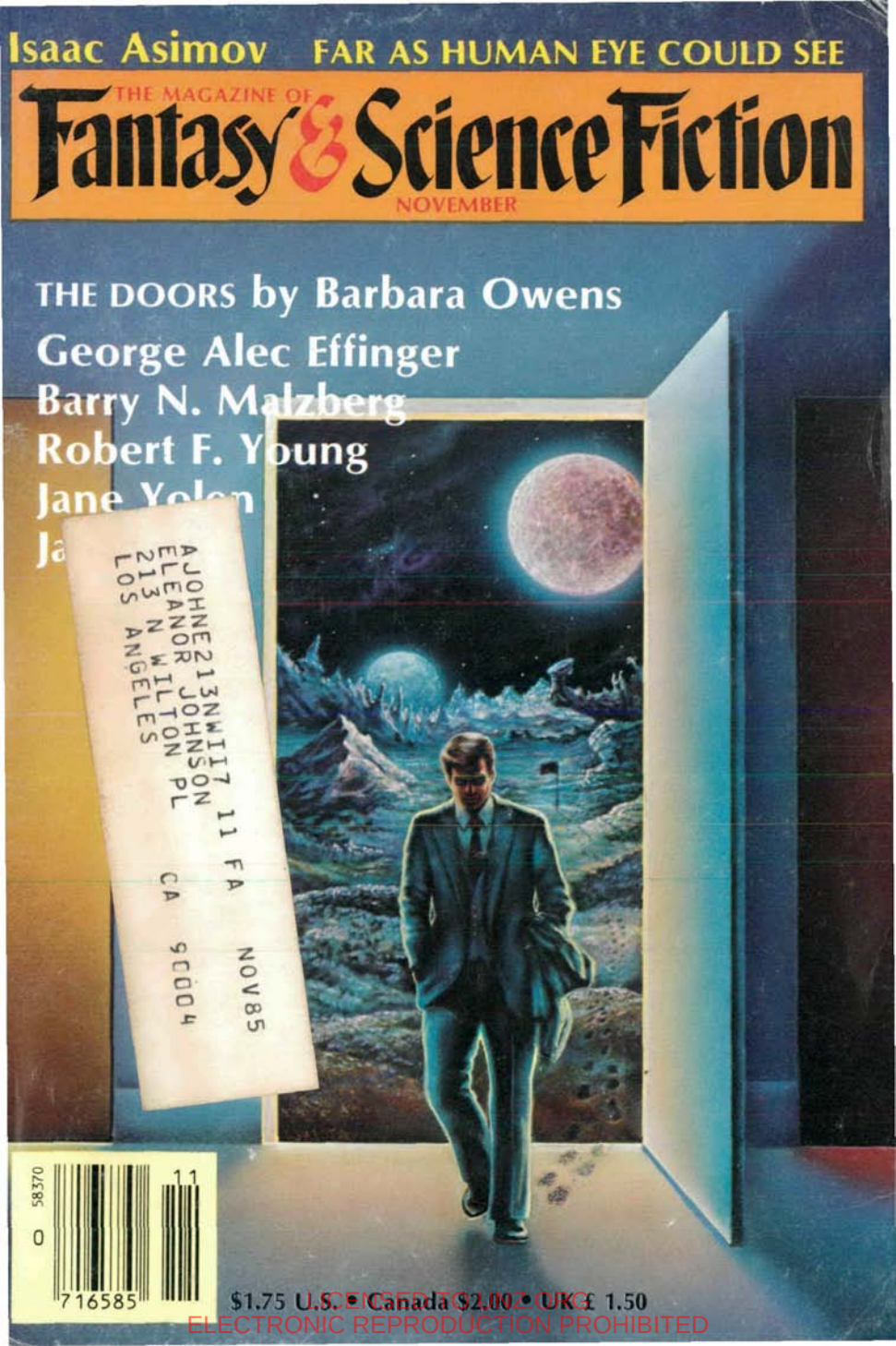


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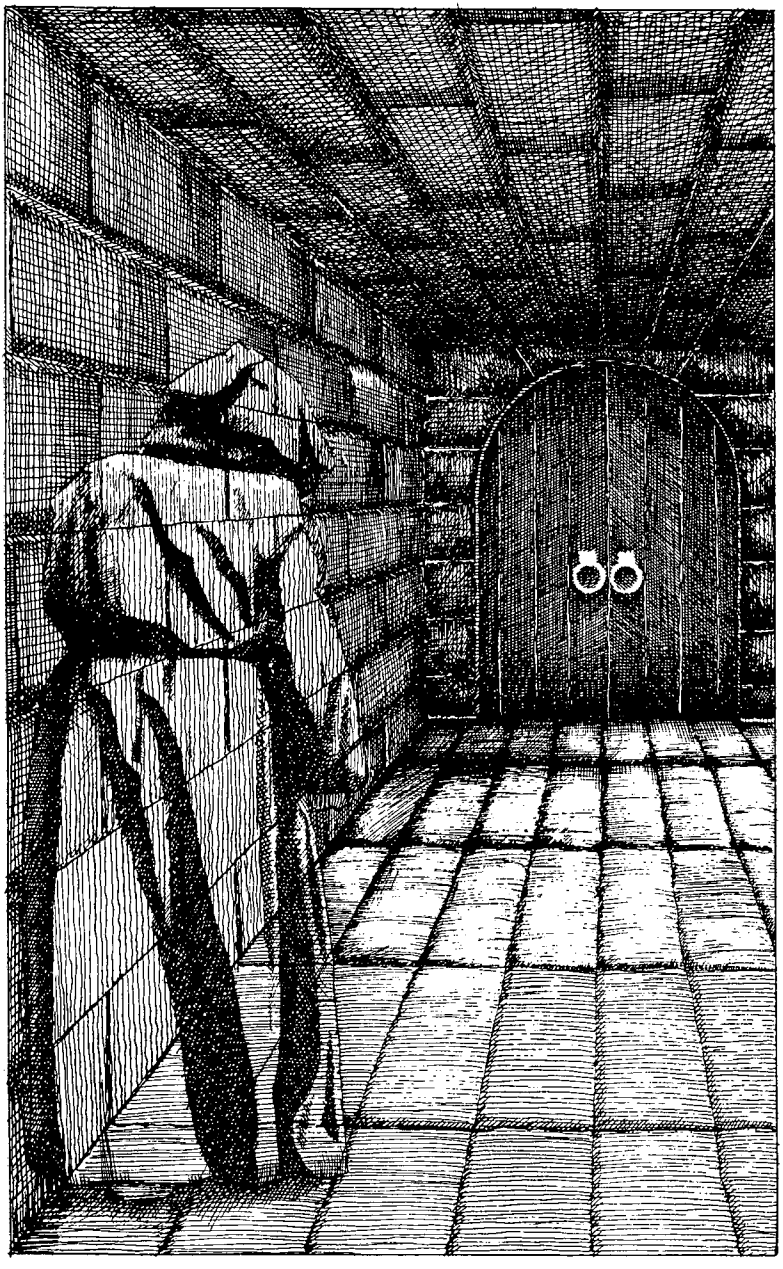

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## TWO BROTHERS

ONE WEAK AND ONE STRONG ...
A DYING KING ...
A BURNING MOUSE ...
AND A DARK MAGICIAN
NAMED FLAGG.

# THE EYES OF THE DRAGON

## STEPHEN KING

In the late fall of 1984, the Philtrum Press of Bangor, Maine will publish *The Eyes of the Dragon*, a new novel by Stephen King.

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*The Eyes of the Dragon* is being offered in a limited edition of 1000 copies, at a price of $120.00. The price, although steep, has been calculated to bring this unique publishing venture to no more than a break even point, assuming a sell-out of the edition. The novel will be published commercially, but not until at least 1987. The book will be of exceptional quality, approximately 320 pages printed on French mold-made paper, hardbound and enclosed in a slipcase.

To obtain a copy of *The Eyes of the Dragon*, send your name and address to: THE PHILTRUM PUBLISHING COMPANY, BOX 1186, BANGOR, MAINE 04401. Send no money, please. If we receive more than a thousand requests for the book by November 5th, 1984 (and in perfect honesty, we expect this to be the case), we will draw one thousand names in a lottery and then solicit payment from those people. Additional names will be drawn when first mailers either cannot be reached or indicate they are no longer interested.

*The Eyes of the Dragon* is a wonderful/terrible tour of a land that never was, by a master of fantasy. This one-of-a-kind edition, signed and numbered by the author, will ship on or about December 10th, 1984.

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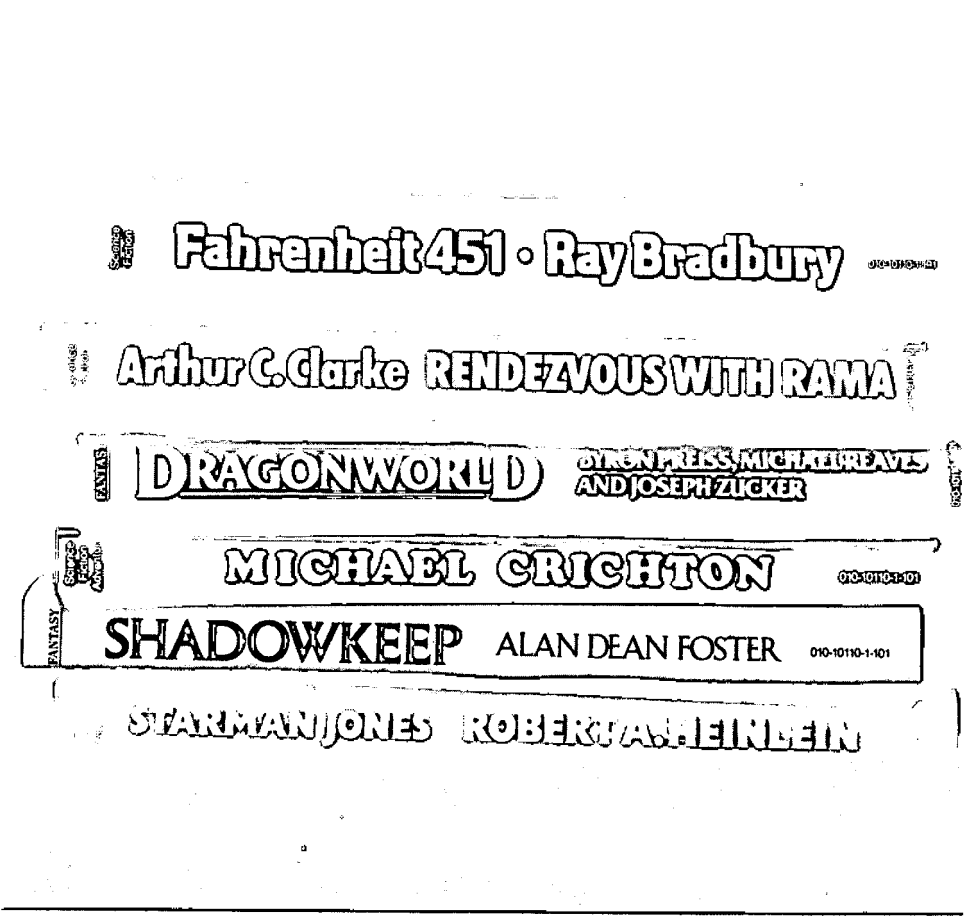
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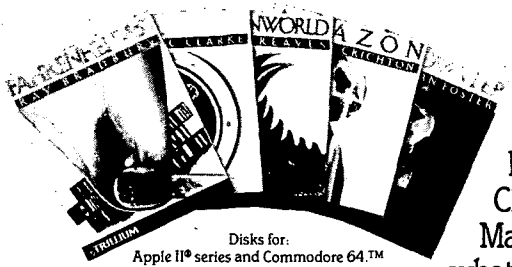


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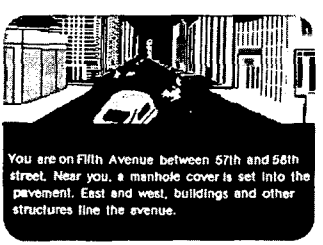
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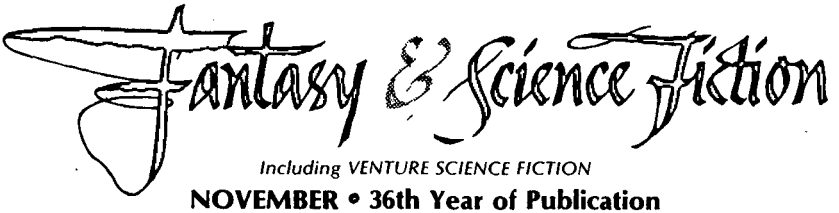


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COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "THE DOORS"

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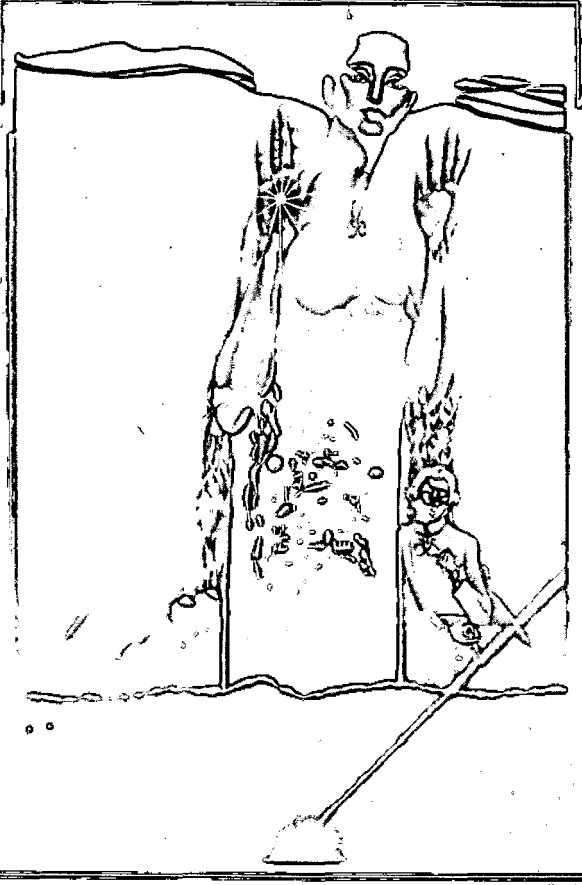
## JOAN D. VINGE



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# The Black Horn

BY
**JACK DANN**

From his oceanfront room on the tenth floor of the Hotel Casablanca, Judge Stephen Steiner saw the unicorn standing in the shallow end of the swimming pool below. It was almost four in the morning, and most of the Christmas tree lights of the gambling ships three miles out on the ocean had been turned off. The expanse of beach ahead was dark and ominous, except for a single light that burned to the left on the beach that belonged to the Fontainebleau Hotel. But the Casablanca pool was illuminated by green and red underwater lights, giving the breeze-blown surface of the water an almost luminary quality, as of melted, rippling gems.

The unicorn looked grayish in the light, although surely it was white, and large, at least eighteen hands high from poll to hoof. Its mane was dark and shaggy; and at first Steiner thought it was a horse. But how strange to see a horse running loose on the beach at such an hour. There must be *laws* prohibiting animals from running loose, he thought. Miami Beach is a densely populated area ... surely there must be a law. Perhaps this horse had run away from its owner ... perhaps it was part of a road show ... a circus.

My God, Steiner mused, how long has it been since *I've* been to a circus...?

It was then that Steiner noticed that the horse had a horn protruding from its wide forehead. He hadn't noticed it before because the horn was black ... and also perhaps he didn't see it because he'd *assumed* he was looking at a horse, and horses didn't have horns. But now Steiner could see that horn. It looked like black marble.


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It was long and fluted and would make a vicious weapon. The horn reflected the green and red light as if the light were oil flowing along its conchlike spirals.

The unicorn dipped its horn into the pool, as if to neutralize some chlorine poison in the water, and then drank.

Steiner reached for his glasses, although he didn't really need them for distance. It couldn't be, he thought, yet there it was. Perhaps it was some advertising gimmick, but Steiner discounted that thought immediately. No one would let an animal run loose at this time of night, horned or otherwise.

Then the animal raised its head, as if sensing that it was being watched. It blew air through its muzzle and looked up at the building, slowly turning its head, scanning the windows on one story, then going on to another, until finally it seemed that the unicorn had found him. It seemed to be looking right *at* him, and Steiner felt transfixed, even through the thick, protective pane of glass. The unicorn knew he was there.

It was looking at *him*.

Steiner felt drawn to it ... it was as beautiful as a childhood fantasy. Yet there was something dangerous and even sinister about it; its very being challenged Steiner's reason, and Steiner himself. Steiner felt an almost uncontrollable urge to smash through the window and jump ... as if by some sort of television magic he'd be able to leap through the glass and land on the unicorn's back.

He found himself pressing dangerously hard against the plate-glass window as he stared down at the animal below that was still as stone, watching him.

Suddenly he *wanted* to jump.

"No!" he cried, feeling sudden, reeling terror, for he knew in that instant that if he could have jumped, he would have. It was as if he had glimpsed his own death deep in the eyes of that beautiful horned stallion staring up at him from the pool.

He turned away from the window and closed his eyes tightly, so tightly that everything turned purple for an instant. Then, slowly, he turned back toward the window. There was nothing there, just the metal lounge chairs situated around the illuminated pool, and the dark beach and ocean stretching into flat darkness. He looked to his left, toward the dimly lit Fontainebleau beach, but there was no sign of anything there, either.

Steiner closed the curtains and sat down on his uncomfortable double bed. His hands were shaking. He reached for a bottle of kosher brandy on the nightstand beside him and took a shot right out of the tinted green bottle. The stuff tasted like hell; it was coarse, not made as well as in the past — or perhaps he just remembered the past as being better in all respects.



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He suddenly thought of his wife, Grace, who had died six months ago, God rest her sweet soul. Although he had been separated from her for over ten years, she had waited ... waited for him to come back home. But he just couldn't have gone back. Grace would have been a constant reminder of everything Steiner feared. He needed younger women to feed his ego ... to be in awe of him. They all probably thought he had money, but they were his only barricade against the fustiness of old age ... against death itself. They kept him feeling young.

He felt the old guilt weighing down upon him. Grace, I'm sorry....

The air-conditioner was on; it suddenly felt cold in the room. The graft on Steiner's back, where he had had a melanoma removed, hurt him tonight.

He'd inquire tomorrow at the desk whether there were any reports of a horse running loose. It *was* a horse, Steiner told himself, as he lay his head against the lumpy, overlarge pillow.

But he couldn't fall back to sleep

After morning prayers in the makeshift synagogue on the fourth floor of the hotel, Steiner met his three sisters for breakfast. He escorted them to their table on the eastern side of the grand old dining room, which overlooked the beach and the perfectly blue ocean beyond. The table was prepared, and their waitress was waiting to attend them. Behind each setting was a glass borsch mixed with sour cream. An unopened box of egg matzoth stood in the center of the table, as prominent as a bouquet of freshly cut flowers.

Steiner sat each of his sisters and then himself.

It was Passover, and Cele and Kate and Mollie had decided it would be better for Steiner if they all spent the holiday together at a hotel. Steiner could not disappoint them ... somehow he would get through it. Although Cele was quite well off, she lived with her two sisters in Flatbush. Those two counted their pennies as if they were all being chased by the specter of relief. But Cele would spend her money for a good cause, especially if it involved family and religion ... so this was a real vacation for them. And who knew how long Steiner might have them, anyway? Cele was the youngest, and she was seventy-seven.

Steiner was five years her junior....

"It's another ***beautiful*** day," Cele said brightly, placing her green linen napkin on her lap. She wore a crisp red flowerpot hat that matched her square-shouldered jacket with patch pockets. It was as if she had never left the 1940s. Her dyed blonde hair was combed down smoothly, and tightly rolled up at the ends, and she was growing a bit thin on top. She had a long, oval face with great blue eyes, the same lively eyes that used to tease



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Steiner sixty years ago. Cele was going to make the best of her vacation in the sun. "Don't you think so, Stephen? Isn't it a beautiful day? Of course, you *live* here in Florida, so sunshine is probably old hat to you."

Steiner managed a smile, but he was in a disagreeable mood. Two hours of sitting and standing and praying with a congregation of evil-smelling, doddering old men had sapped him of all *joie de vivre* ... had soured his morning. Although Steiner had always prided himself on being a religious man — he donned his prayer shawl and phylacteries every morning to pray toward the east, and it was to just that habit that he attributed what wealth and fame and good fortune he had acquired over the years — he couldn't *stand* being around old people. It was as simple as that. Steiner glanced uncomfortably around the room. Just sitting in the dining room made his flesh crawl — this entire hotel seemed to be filled with the most Orthodox and the oldest of Jews. Association could kill you ... *would* kill you. Make your flesh shrivel right up. That was another reason why Steiner had never gone back home; even before his beloved Grace had died, she smelled of the grave. Her skin had turned wrinkled and dry, and she exhuded an odor that could not be concealed by even the most expensive perfume.

He turned to Mariana, his waitress, who was ready to take their orders. Her very presence lightened his mood. She was Brazilian, dark, strong-featured, with full lips and tilted green eyes; her wiry black hair, though disguised in a bun, was long. She couldn't be more than twenty-one, the epitome of youth itself. Steiner flashed her a smile and ordered breakfast for his sisters and himself. He felt as if he were swelling up, regaining everything he had lost upstairs in the synagogue; and he heard a pompous affectation come into his voice, which was rather loud and bombastic, but he couldn't help himself ... and anyway, a fine, articulated sentence had *always* impressesd the young ladies.

When Mariana left and the busboy was out of earshot, Steiner's sister Kate said, "You know, Stephen, you make a fool out of yourself talking like that to the waitress." Kate was two years older than Cele, and she seemed to bear a grudge against any woman under sixty ... or so Steiner thought. Kate had once been beautiful, high-breasted and thin-waisted, but now she had become puffy. She dyed her hair orange-red. Steiner nicknamed her "the Flying Nun" because she wrapped paper around her hair every night so it wouldn't muss.

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, ma'am," Steiner said stiffly, still using the artificial inflection he used with people he wished to impress. Cele gave Kate a nasty look and shook her head. Mollie, who was the oldest, didn't seem to be listening; in-



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stead she began talking about her children, who were supposed to visit her the week after Passover.

"Well, he *does* make a fool out of himself," Kate said to Cele.

"Stephen's right," Cele said, speaking sharply but in a low voice. "Mind your business."

"We can't even talk to each other around here," Kate said petulantly, as she smoothed out the napkin on her lap. Kate was overdressed in a silk gauze summer dress trimmed with black; she also wore a small pillbox hat with a veil.

"Why are you wearing a veil this morning?" Steiner asked. "You look like you're still in mourning."

"Well, I am ... and you should be, too!" Then she caught herself. "I'm sorry, Stephen. I'm just not myself this morning—"

"On the contrary, you're very much yourself this morning," Mollie interrupted. Mollie wore a tan suit and blouse. Her hair was gray and frizzy, and she had a crinkly, Irish-looking face.

"Mollie, shut up," Kate said, and then continued talking to Steiner. "I didn't sleep well last night at all. I have a canker sore or something in my mouth, and my whole jaw's killing me. I don't even think I'll be able to eat."

"Oh, she'll eat," Mollie said sarcastically.

"And for your information" — Kate was still talking to Steiner — "I'm wearing a hat because this is a religious hotel, and religious women are supposed to wear hats. I can't help it if the hat has a veil."

"She's right, Stephen," Cele said. "Look around, all the women are wearing hats." She self-consciously adjusted her own hat.

"Of course I'm right," Kate said softly, indicating by her tone of voice that she was willing to drop the argument.

Mariana brought the food, purposely serving Stephen first, which stimulated a *tss*ing from Kate. Steiner teased the waitress by telling her how beautiful she looked, and she blushed and backed away.

Cele changed the subject by saying, "I think we should all sit by the pool when we're finished with breakfast. That would nice, wouldn't it?"

"I'm going upstairs," Kate said. "I'm not feeling at all well."

"Kitty, you can take me upstairs with you," Mollie said. She was slightly infirm, and had trouble navigating stairs by herself.

"I think we should *all* spend at least a few minutes together in the sun," Cele said firmly — although she was the youngest, except for Steiner, *she* made all the decisions for her sisters.

"He shouldn't be out in the sun with his cancer," Kate said petulantly.

"You see, there she goes again," Mollie said to Cele. "Always starting *some*thing."



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Cele flashed Kate a nasty look, and Mollie seemed pleased with herself. Then Cele said in a calm, quiet voice, "The morning sun is not dangerous, I'm told ... it's the afternoon sun that has the dangerous rays."

Steiner nodded without paying much attention, but he always sided with Cele. She had enough of a cross to bear, living with and supporting her two sisters. He looked up and smiled generously at Mariana as she cleared the table. He could see the tiny dark hairs bristling on her arms, and could smell her slightly pungent, musk-like odor. She returned his smile, her cheeks dimpling, and for an instant their eyes met. Steiner felt his heart pump faster ... felt his glands open up. He imagined making love to her ... imagined her naked and holding him like a baby in a dimly lit bedroom. She would be beautiful naked, he thought, daydreaming about how she would look with her hair undone and hanging loose down her bare back. She would look like a wild animal....

She's a perfect madonna, he thought ... but then he had thought that about every waitress and shop clerk and hatcheck and typist he had ever dated. Perhaps later, when his sisters went upstairs for their afternoon nap, he'd work up the courage to go into the hotel kitchen and ask her out. He could buy her a tall, lemony drink by the pool, talk to her in whispers, caress her, and then take her back to her apartment....

That thought alone gave him the strength to take his sisters outside to the pool, where they could gab and complain and gossip in Yiddish with their newfound octogenarian friends and neighbors.

Steiner did not go upstairs with his sisters, but made the excuse that he wished to take some more sun and maybe a walk before going inside. Cele seemed a bit agitated that he would get sick from *too* much sun, but he promised to sit in the shade near the cabanas. Steiner felt nothing but claustrophobic in the presence of his sisters.

"I wouldn't mind taking a walk myself," Cele said, standing over him and looking forlornly out to sea. "Come, we'll take a walk now down Collins Avenue, and then you can sit in the sun if you really want to."

"Well, *I* have to go upstairs," Mollie said. "My feet are ***killing*** me."

Kate, who had wanted to go upstairs earlier, now said, "I wouldn't mind taking a walk and doing some window-shopping. It might be good for me, make me forget how much my jaw is aching me."

"Well, I can take Mollie upstairs and—" Cele said, but she gave up in mid-sentence, accepting her responsibility to her sisters. Steiner could see the trapped frustration in her face. "All right," she said resignedly,


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"I suppose we should just go upstairs...."

"I'll take a walk with you, Stephen," Kate said.

"Either we'll *all* take a walk or we'll all go upstairs together," Cele said, her hands gently shaking, whether from age or anger, Steiner didn't know. But he felt guilty, for he had sacrificed Cele to them just so he could be alone ... Cele deserved better than that. The poor old girl....

But Steiner was on his feet as soon as his sisters disappeared into the side entrance of the hotel. It's too hot out here anyway, he told himself, sweating under his polyester powder-blue shirt and matching slacks. He wore a white jacket and white loafers. As he passed, the gossips and wrinkled sunbathers nodded to him and said, "Good morning, Judge."

Steiner hadn't been a judge for thirty years, and even then had served only one term. But Steiner liked the title — it opened "doors" for him. Everyone called him "Judge" at the very exclusive Boca Club, where he was a member. In fact, he had had the heraldic blue and white and gold emblem sewed on all his sports jackets. Of course, he didn't attend very many functions there, as they were very expensive. But he had been known to take his dates to the club for swanky luncheons. Perhaps Mariana would visit him at his home in Fort Lauderdale, and he could take her, too....

He was immersed in that daydream as he stepped through the coffee shop beside the pool area and into the large kitchen behind. There were busboys and waiters and waitresses bustling around, carrying large aluminum trays in and out of the two wide swinging doors that led into the dining area. Cooks and helpers were working at sinks and long wooden tables. Squashed prunes and apples and matzo bree and puddles of soup and juice and coffee discolored the white tile floor.

Mariana stepped backward into the kitchen, pushing the door open. She was holding a tray filled with glasses and dishes and silverware.

"Mariana!" Steiner said, overly loud. She turned to him, looking surprised, but no one else seemed to notice his presence ... or care.

She put the heavy tray down on one of the tables and said, "Yes, Judge? Is something wrong?" She tilted her head in a most attractive manner, Steiner thought.

"Yes ... I just thought—" and suddenly the words left him. He felt awkward and foolish ... and suddenly paranoid that she would think he was a "dirty old man." But that was plain stupid! he told himself. She doesn't even know why I'm here yet. "Do you have any plans for this evening?" he blurted out. But even as he spoke, he realized that he had lost the advantage entirely ... that now *she* was in the position of power.

"I'm not sure what you mean,



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Judge," she said, looking uncomfortable. "I'll be taking care of your table tonight, is that—"

"No ... I mean, would you care to have a drink with me *after* dinner, after you've finished working. Perhaps we could meet at the Fontainebleau ... by the bar. It's very nice there."

"Well ... I don't know." She was actually blushing. *That's* a good sign.

"I'll be waiting for you at poolside at ten o'clock," Steiner said with authority, feeling much better about the venture now.

"I'm really not supposed to be going out with the guests," she said coyly, her eyes averted from his. "I could get fired, and—"

"Well ... *I'll* be waiting for you at" — Steiner looked at his thin gold watch for effect — "ten o'clock sharp."

"I've really got to get back to work, please...."

"Ten o'clock," Steiner said smartly, using his best judicial tone. Mariana nodded once, shyly, her eyes still averted from his.

Steiner turned heel back to the pool area.

Once outside, back in the sun, he felt relieved and full of nervous energy. He felt like a schoolboy dreaming about the girl he was going to take to the senior prom. He couldn't stand the thought of going back to his room or sitting in the hotel lobby, which smelled of old age and was filled with urns of fake flowers and plants. He couldn't bear to look at another old man or woman. He couldn't sleep, and he had just eaten.

He just wanted to be alone and daydream....

He found himself walking along the sand toward the ocean. Perhaps he'd walk along the beach to the Fontainebleau, have a drink, and then return down Collins Avene, thus making a circle. But once he reached the Fontainebleau and saw the pool and bar to his left, he just didn't feel like stopping. He was too filled with energy to stop and sit, so he continued walking, enjoying the brisk breeze coming off the ocean, the healthy smell of the salt air, and the pounding of the surf just inches away from his sand-encrusted white loafers. He dreamed about Mariana ... and imagined himself as a young man courting her, a young man with thick black hair and a strong, handsome face. A strong man eyed by every bikini-clad woman he passed....

But Steiner was beginning to swelter in the afternoon heat. The sun was unbearable, and Steiner had misjudged how much of it he could take. The ocean breeze, which was at first cool and refreshing, now felt hot and muggy. He turned around and started back to his hotel.

Thank goodness he didn't have far to go.

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Steiner wouldn't have seen the unicorn if it hadn't made a snorting noise as he passed. It stood behind a dozen one-man red and white sailboats leaning against an old pier that was in disrepair. It stood in the shadows, as if to cool off.

The unicorn carefully stepped out from the boats and gazed at Steiner with its ocean-blue eyes. It pawed the sand with its heel, sending ribbons of sand into the air to be carried away on the wind.

Steiner stopped, transfixed again by the unicorn. He broke out in a sweat, but it was cold sweat, and from fear rather than heat. "What do you *want*?" he asked, feeling foolish talking to an animal like this, but he had to break the spell with *something* ... a word, the sound of his voice. Suddenly Steiner was aware of a myriad of tiny details: the soft pinkness of the unicorn's muzzle; the white whiskers growing out of its chin and nostrils; its coarse, shaggy white mane and fetlocks; its cloven hooves worn from the sand; and the strange, ridged black horn that looked as if it had somehow erupted from the animal's forehead. In fact, it looked glassy, as if it might have indeed been formed from lava. In the bright sunlight it took on a reddish sheen, which seemed to deepen at the tip. Steiner was acutely award of the splashing and gurgling of the surf, but he couldn't make out any *human* sounds, except for his own quickened breathing. This was an empty stretch of beach. Steiner was shaking, and he felt weak. The animal was so *large*. It looked like a huge Morgan, with its muscular back, strong neck, and large head. It stood square, its legs right under its shoulders. The unicorn was overpowering ... yet it *seemed* to be gentle. It didn't move, but seemed to be made of porcelain and coal. It just stared at Steiner; and it was as if the unicorn's eyes were blue magnets pulling him closer ... and Steiner imagined how it would be to ride this great beast, to feel its bulk beneath him and the wind whistling in his ears and the salt spray biting his chest and face. He could ride it along the beach ... along the ocean.

The unicorn took a cautious step toward Steiner.

Suddenly Steiner remembered last night and broke the reverie. He stepped back in terror, almost falling over his own feet. The unicorn took on an entirely different guise as Steiner remembered how he had wanted to jump from his window at the mere sight of the beast. The unicorn — as if reading Steiner's thoughts —whinnied and pawed the sand. Then, ready to charge, it lowered its head.

The sharp black horn was pointed directly at Steiner.

And Steiner saw the unicorn for what it was: death. Death in its simplest, most beautiful guise. "No," he whispered to the beast. "No!" he screamed, hating it. He turned from



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the unicorn and ran, his narrow-toed Italian white loafers heeling into the soft sand. His eyes burned and seemed to go out of focus as he ran. His heart felt as if it were pounding in his throat. He could *hear* the unicorn behind him. He could *feel* the unicorn's horn at his back, ready to slash him wide open.

But Steiner wasn't ready for death. He wanted to live. He *had* to live. If death was going to take him, it would have to take him on the run. Steiner wasn't going to make it easy. He wasn't going to slip into any eternal slumber with a toothless good-bye. Not Steiner.

He ran as hard as he could, the blood pulsing in his chest and head, making him dizzy, until he tripped over a tangled, polished piece of driftwood and fell headlong into the sand. He turned backward, resolved to face death with his eyes open.

But the unicorn was gone . . . disappeared. There were no tracks, except for his own, no outline of equine heel or bar or furrow in the soft white sand. Steiner tried to catch his breath. He felt at once relieved and anxious. He *had* been chased by something. His breathing began to return to normal, but he had a flash of searing pain in his abdomen, and his arms and shoulders felt heavy and began to ache. He broke out into cold sweat. He felt clammy and chilled and nauseated. It was the fall, he told himself . . . and the exercise. He hadn't run like that in forty years.

But one thing was certain: he *had* seen a horse with a horn. It might have been some sort of publicity trick, but it was no hallucination. Steiner wasn't the type to hallucinate. He might have had some crazy thoughts when the beast was chasing him, but then, who wouldn't? He felt foolish, running as he had. The damned thing obviously hadn't been chasing him, or he would have seen it when he had turned around. Actually, if it had *really* been chasing him it would have run him through with that horn in no time flat.

Still . . . it *had* to be some sort of publicity stunt, Steiner thought.

Steiner told his sisters he wasn't feeling very well and stayed in his room. He forced himself to take a swallow of brandy and tried to sleep, but he felt feverish. Frenzied, unconnected thoughts flashed through his mind. He tucked himself under the covers. The pain seemed to lift.

I'm *not* crazy, he thought, raising himself up on his right elbow to gaze out the window at the pool and ocean below. The ocean was turquoise green in the shallows and deep cyan blue farther out. The sun was bright and warm and reassuring. Although no one was swimming in the pool, there were over thirty people sitting in deck chairs and chatting while others walked about. Everything was perfectly all right, exactly as it should be, as ordinary as bread.



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Then Steiner saw the unicorn lift its head out of the ocean.

At first, he thought he was seeing a wave, a distant whitecap, but there was no mistaking that black fluted horn. There were those blue eyes and thick white mane and muscular neck. The unicorn rose out of the water, revealing itself little by little as it moved into the shallows, until the water was only up to its knees and it walked forward, kicking, lifting its long legs out of the water, onto the beach. The unicorn was dripping wet and as big as life. It stood on the edge of the empty beach and looked up at Steiner, as foamy water purled past its hooves. It ***knew*** Steiner was there. It had come for him again.

"Go away!" he shouted, as he shakily got up from his bed. As the pain began to radiate into his shoulders and arms and chest, he pulled the curtains closed.

But he knew the unicorn was still out there, waiting....

Steiner felt much better by dinnertime. He had rested, and the aching in his arms and chest was gone, as were the sweats and fever. Steiner was prone to night sweats, anyway. He was apprehensive about opening the heavy curtains, so he left well enough alone . . . he had had enough excitement for one day.

He dressed informally in tan shirt and slacks and went downstairs to pick up a newspaper in the lobby. He leafed through it outside the shabby hotel shop that sold magazines, newspapers, aspirin, suntan lotions, cheap trinkets, and sunglasses. He was disappointed—there wasn't even a mention of a circus, or a carnival, or a runaway horse ... or a unicorn. Well, *someone* must have seen the damn thing, too, he thought. Surely, it will be in *tomorrow's* papers.

He put the newspaper back on the rack and met his sisters for dinner in the dining room. He felt a bit hesitant about seeing Mariana before their forthcoming tryst at the Fontainebleau, but it couldn't be avoided. If he *didn't* show up for dinner, she might think he was ill or not interested, and she might not meet him later. Still, he felt uncomfortable. But when she took his order, and Steiner smiled at her, she returned it. She even blushed. That made Steiner feel very good indeed.

Everything else went along as it had for the past five days. Cele and Kate and Mollie discussed the menu and chose each dish with care, but when the food actually came, each one complained bitterly that she should have ordered a different entrée. Kate complained about her sore mouth. Mollie talked about her children and "the grandkids" and told Cele that the veal was the wrong color.

After dinner and a wink at Mariana, Steiner accompanied his sisters to



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the obligatory 7:30 show in the ballroom, where the hotel rabbi — a slick stand-up comedian, who had made records and played the Catskills every year—was performing. Steiner didn't listen to the stale jokes. He kept glancing at his watch. After the show, he kissed his sisters good night and went to his room to change into fresh, more formal clothes for his date with Mariana. He felt a bit weak and dizzy, but he was determined to go out tonight, as if he had to prove something to himself.

As he entered the room, he examined himself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. He had a shock of white hair, which was yellowed a bit in the back; deep brown eyes; a thin nose; and a full, sensual mouth—it was a strong, angular face that had loosened with age. Although the face-lift two years ago had helped, lines still mapped his face. But he certainly didn't look his age.

He began to feel anxious here in the room, but he made a point of not going near the closed curtains. He could hear the faint murmur of the surf; it was like gentle white noise. He wondered if the unicorn were still out there as he changed into a smart-looking chocolate brown suit with a matching tie and a white-on-white shirt. His brogues were a bit scuffed; he reminded himself to buy polish. He concentrated on small details.

But he couldn't leave the room this time without finding out if the unicorn were still out there. He pulled open the drapes and looked out the salt-stained window ... he looked by the pool and on the beach ... he looked at the white-crested black waves of the ocean.

The pool area and the beach were empty.

There was not a unicorn to be seen.

Steiner took a small table in front of the enclosed driftwood bar poolside at the Fontainebleau. The pool was huge and kidney-shaped, and Steiner enjoyed a tall whiskey and soda while he watched floodlit water cascading down a stonework waterfall into the pool. Palms were spaced around the pool area, and green and blue lights gave the place a festive, romantic atmosphere. To his left were the glass doors that led into the Fontainebleau shopping center; to his right, across an expanse of lawn, was the new ten-story addition to the hotel. Cozy paths wound their way between palmettos and hibiscuses, and the ocean was a dull, dark pounding behind him. Guests in evening clothes, in jeans and tubetops, in bathing suits and clogs, in gaudy slacks and Hawaiian shirts promenaded past him. Two callow-looking teenaged lovers walked by, hand in hand, followed by a small group of executives and their wives. The whole world



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seemed to be carved into *twos*. But Steiner felt strong with excitement and anticipation; he felt dashing, good-looking, if just a trifle tired.

As he sat, waiting, two women who looked to be in their late thirties sat down at the wooden table beside him. One was dumpy-looking and plump; she wore clogs, white Bermuda shorts that were too tight for her, and a very revealing pink halter top. Her hair was blonde and coarse, obviously bleached. Her companion, in contrast, looked quite demure. She was tall and skinny, with short-cropped brown hair and a long, hollow-cheeked face. She wore a blue outfit—a blue blazer and a pleated white and blue skirt—which was actually quite stylish. But she had the worst teeth that Steiner had ever seen. Her two front teeth were long and crooked and widely spaced, and one protruded beyond the other. Obviously, they should have been pulled long ago. She must be a country girl, Steiner thought. Country people don't take care of their teeth ... they hate dentists.

Steiner ignored the women and waited for Mariana. He gazed at the path that led from the shopping center: the direction that Mariana should be coming from. He sipped his drink and eavesdropped on the conversation of the men at the bar. From what he could overhear, they were microprocessor executives from Atlanta here on a convention. They talked mostly about getting laid.

The blonde woman kept smiling at the men at the bar. To Steiner's surprise, the ploy worked, because when the waitress came to take her order, one of the men insisted on buying the blonde woman a drink. He was rather good-looking in an athletic sort of way ... what the hell would he want with someone like *that?* Steiner mused. Steiner couldn't help but stare. The man sat down, winked at his friends at the bar, and put his arm around the back of the blonde woman's chair. She was cooing and shifting about, smiling and nuzzling closer to the man as introductions were made. The other woman craned her long neck slightly to join in the conversation, but she looked uncomfortable, although she was the type who *always* looks uncomfortable. Steiner watched the executive lean forward to get a better look at the blonde's breasts; but Steiner was caught staring by the tall woman, who was looking directly at him. She smiled at him without revealing her teeth. Steiner nodded curtly and turned away.

That's *all* I need, he told himself. But he was getting anxious. Where *was* Mariana, anyway? It's ten o'clock already. I was a fool not to have gotten her home phone number. Dammit! Perhaps I can call the hotel ... she just might be working late. Steiner called from the bar, where the rest of the men were taking bets on whether their friend would get laid



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or not. Steiner watched the burly executive making his pass at the blonde. Then Mr. Lareina, the maître d', came to the phone and told Steiner that Mariana had left shortly after nine. "All right, thanks," Steiner said and hung up. He wasn't going to abase himself by asking for her home phone—Lareina wouldn't give it out, anyway.

Steiner sat back down at his table. He felt dazed. He brooded and stared out at the pastel-lit path leading to the Fontainebleau. Perhaps Mariana went home first to change.

Then he saw her. He straightened up in his chair, and waved excitedly to the dark-haired woman approaching the pool area. She was walking quickly on high heels, as if late for an appointment. Steiner felt a warm rush of anticipation. He started to get up as she approached ... and only then realized that she *wasn't* Mariana. Up close, she didn't look like Mariana at all. She looked quizzically at Steiner, who was half out of his chair.

Steiner was mortified. He sat down reflexively. How could I have made such a mistake? he asked himself. He thought about going home, slinking away, crawling into his cool, uncomfortable bed, but he just *couldn't* leave. Mariana *had* to show. He *wouldn't* be stood up! Pain began to radiate once again throughout his arms and shoulders, then down into his chest.

"Girl troubles?" asked the skinny woman sitting at the table beside Steiner. She had a thin, reedy voice.

Steiner turned toward her. "I *beg* your pardon," he said, annoyed.

The woman tried to smile without revealing her teeth. "Your friend ... she might just be late, that's all," she said nervously. But she was persistent. "Why don't you have a drink with *us?* We'll cheer you up, we're good company ... and here I am a third wheel. Help us out."

"Thank you kindly, but ... I don't think so," Steiner said. The skinny woman pouted, an exaggerated moue.

"Oh, c'mon, buddy *I'll* buy you a drink," the executive said as he self-consciously ran his hand through his short-cropped hair. But Steiner knew his type, all right. He had probably been a bully when he was a kid, and a ROTC lieutenant in the army, and now he's some sort of zipperhead IBM-type manager who makes life hell for everyone under him. He was obviously looking for a way to cut the blonde away from her friend, and he was trying to use Steiner as a foil. "C'mon, what the hell," the man said, flashing a boyish smile, and he jumped his chair toward Steiner and then pulled his table over until it was touching Steiner's. The blonde woman laughed when the drinks spilled, and then she and her friend moved their chairs closer, too. Steiner was too embarrassed to do anything but accept the situation. He felt even more uncomfortable with the skinny woman pressing close to his elbow.



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The executive waved down the waitress, and Steiner ordered another drink, which he didn't need ... he was achy and dizzy as it was, and his right arm felt numb. "So, friend, where do you hail from?" the man asked Steiner as he massaged the blonde's arm, purposely letting his fingers brush against her breast. The skinny woman leaned closer to Steiner, as if expecting him to answer in a whisper.

"I'm from upstate New York," Steiner said. "Binghamton." He felt his skin crawl. The woman was *too* close to him. She smelled of cheap perfume, and she had chicken skin. God ... he could imagine what she *really* smelled like.

"Is that so," the skinny woman said. "I've been through there. I used to live in Milford, Pennsylvania. Small world, isn't it?"

Steiner didn't have anything to say to that; he just leaned away from her and nodded glumly.

"I'm from Detroit," the executive said. "I'm in systems management ... mostly consultation work for engineering firms. What's your line?"

"I'm a judge ... was a judge, I'm retired now," Steiner replied.

"A *judge*!" the skinny woman said, brightening. "Jeeze, we don't have *any* manners here at this table. I'm Joline, and my friend here is Sandy, and he's ... *oops*"—she said, turning to the man from Detroit—"I've forgotten your name."

"Frank," the man said, paying the waitress for the new round of drinks.

"I'll take care of that," Steiner said stiffly, automatically, but Frank wouldn't hear of it.

"You haven't told us *your* name," Joline said.

God, she has a chalkboard voice, Steiner thought. "Stephen," he mumbled.

"That's a very nice name," Joline said, warming to her role as Steiner's new companion. "It fits you, somehow."

Stephen felt trapped at his own table. He began to perspire. Joline primly sipped her drink—something white and frothy in a tall, frosted glass—through two short narrow cocktail straws. Steiner was of the opinion that sipping a drink through those straws, which were made for decoration, was like drinking coffee out of a cup without removing the spoon. Joline wriggled toward him. Every one of her movements seemed exaggerated. "I think you take life very seriously," she said, looking at him intently, as if she were working her way into something profound.

I've *got* to get out of here! Steiner thought. He looked at his watch, making it very apparent that he had other things to do. Frank and Sandy certainly didn't take any notice; they were kissing each other right there at the table like two high school kids on a bench at a roller-skating rink. I *can't* be seen with these people, Steiner told himself. Jesus Christ.... He glanced



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at Joline, who smiled and blushed a little and then firmly pressed her leg against his. She looked somehow limp, as if waiting to be embraced. Oh, Jesus ... Steiner thought.

Frank whispered something to Sandy and then said to Steiner: "Steve, if you've no objections, we're going to take a little walk ... we'll be right back. Give you two a chance to talk. Nice meeting you."

"See you soon, honey," Sandy said to Joline, smiling warmly as she stood up.

"We'll hold down the fort," Joline said shyly, her knee still wedged woodenly against Steiner's.

"Would you care for another drink?" Steiner asked Joline after the others had left. He had to say *something* to her. Her silence was oppressive, and he was uncomfortable enough as it was.

"Yes ... thank you." Joline didn't seem to be able to look at Steiner now that her friend had left, but she leaned against him until he said, "Excuse me," and tried to disengage himself.

"You aren't going to leave me here alone, are you?" Joline asked. There was a pleading in her voice, and suddenly Steiner felt sorry for her ... she was lonely and ugly and past her prime. He felt both loathing and pity. "No ... I'll be right back," he said as he stood up.

"Promise?" Joline asked coyly, trying to smile again without revealing her crooked teeth.

"I promise," Steiner said. Jesus, Mary ... he thought as he walked away. Is *that* the way Mariana saw *me* ... the way I see that poor old girl at the table? Could I be *that* repulsive to her? He knew the answer ... he was an old man wearing old man's pastel clothes. He was an old man carrying a Jewish bankroll. No! he insisted. His skin might be like old clothes, but *he* wasn't old. Suddenly he understood why his wife, Grace, may she rest in peace, had become obsessed with butterflies. She had *filled* her house with butterfly-shaped bric-a-brac before she died.

He walked to the far end of the bar, as if he were going to the men's room, then ducked under the rope that separated deck from beach. Joline would be sitting back there alone, waiting. But I *can't* go back, he thought. He shivered at the thought of kissing that mouth ... feeling that long, protruding tooth with the tip of his tongue ... smelling her odor.

He walked along surf's edge, shoes squishing in the wet sand, and he became lost to the sound of waves pummeling the shell-strewn beach ... lost to the waiting darkness ahead ... lost below the clear sky filled with clusters of silent stars.

He passed a small hotel, which had one beachlamp on overhead, and standing upon the shadow line was the unicorn. It had been waiting for Steiner. It stood tall and gazed at him, only its great horned head clearly vis-



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ible. The unicorn's blue eyes seemed to glow, the same melting, beautiful color of the water in the Blue Grotto in Capri. Steiner stopped, and suddenly remembered being in Europe as a young man, suddenly felt the selfsame awe of the world he had once felt. He also felt lost and empty. He grieved for himself and for the poor woman waiting for him at the Fontainebleau. What would she tell her friends when they returned? Would she, indeed, even wait for them?

Steiner gazed back at the unicorn, trying to make certain it was real and not just the play of shadows, or his imagination. It was *not* his imagination, he told himself. Staring into the unicorn's eyes seemed to stimulate memories he had forgotten for years:

He remembered swimming in the Mediterranean. He remembered a two-week vacation in Atlantic City with Grace and his two sons. He remembered riding bicycles on the boardwalk with his family. He remembered cooking eggs at four o'clock in the morning after a party and permitting the kids to come down and eat, too. He remembered his first trial ... as a lawyer and as a judge. He remembered uneventful days with Grace ... beautiful, precious, never-to-be-recovered days. He remembered coming home to problems with the boys and sharing dinnertime conversation across the table with Grace.

And he suddenly, desperately missed it all. He wanted the days back!

He also remembered the nameless women, and how Grace had begged him to come back. She had waited, but couldn't wait long enough. He wanted to go home ... to Grace. He looked into the unicorn's sad eyes and saw himself, as if in a mirror. He was an empty old man who had lost his life to foolishness. He had wasted all of Grace's love ... and now it was too late to make reparation.

Tears trembled and worked their way down his face, and the unicorn stepped toward him. It walked slowly, as if not to frighten him. Steiner stepped to the side, but did not try to run. The beast lay down beside him and rested its head in the sand, a gesture of submission. Steiner nervously extended his hand toward the unicorn's muzzle. The unicorn didn't flinch or move, and Steiner stroked its forehead. He touched its fluted black horn and saw that its tip looked red, as if dipped in blood.

He felt a contentment radiate through him as he stroked the unicorn. He also felt the throbbing return of the pain in his chest and arms, yet as the pain became greater, so did his sense of being removed from it. As he rested against the unicorn, he felt it quiver, then begin to move. It raised its head, all the while watching Steiner, but before it stood up, Steiner pulled himself upon its back. I *can* ride the beast, Steiner thought as he



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held onto its coarse mane as the unicorn brought itself to full height.

"Come on, boy," Steiner whispered, feeling an almost forgotten heart-pounding joy. The unicorn sensed it, too, because it broke into a playful canter. It shook its head, as if miming laughter, and kicked its hind legs into the air. Steiner held the horse tightly with his legs. He felt his youthful strength returning. He felt at one with the unicorn. The unicorn jumped, galloped, and stopped short, only to sprint forward again. It ran full-out, edging closer to the sea, until it was splashing *in* the water. Steiner was shouting and laughing, unmindful of anything but the perfect joy of the moment. Steiner felt wonderful. For the first time in his life, everything was *right*. He felt he could do *anything*. He was at one with the world ... and he rode and balanced on the back of the unicorn as if he had spent the past forty years of his life riding the wind.

Suddenly the unicorn turned and headed straight out into the ocean. Waves broke against its knees and chest. Steiner's legs were immersed in water. "What are you *doing*?" Steiner shouted joyfully, unafraid but holding on tightly to its neck. The unicorn walked deeper into the sea, past the breakers, until it was swimming smoothly and quickly through the warm, salty water. The sea was like a sheet of black glass, made of the same stuff as the unicorn's horn. It seemed to go on forever.

As the dark water rose over Steiner, he finally accepted the wreck of his life.

The unicorn lifted its great head as it descended into the sea. Steiner took hold of its red-tipped horn, and the unicorn carried him gently down into the ocean's cool, waiting depths.

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## Coming soon

Next month: Featured will be a remarkable new story by **Lucius Shepard** titled "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule." Plus a new story by **Rudy Rucker** and a profile of Rucker by **Charles Platt**. Beginning in January will be **Damon Knight's** new novel, CV. Use the coupon on page 161 to enter your own subscription or to send F&SF as a Christmas gift.



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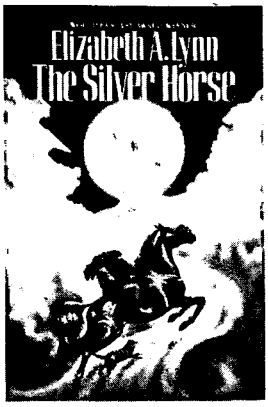


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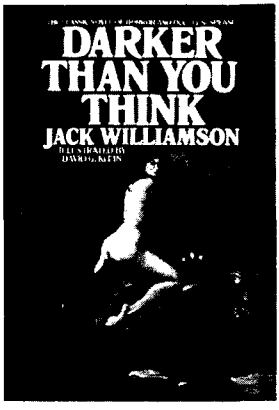


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*No, this is not a partisan magazine, but there is no ignoring Campaign 84, and this story does offer an explanation of sorts for Ronald Reagan's undeniable, if somewhat puzzling, popularity...*

# Play It Again, Sam

BY
**LARRY TRITTEN**

"Listen to this! Do you know who was originally considered for Bogart's part as Rick in *Casablanca?*"

"No. Who?"

"Ronald Reagan."

"Reagan!? You're kidding!"

"Nope. And Ann Sheridan in the Bergman part. I wonder what the movie would have been like."

"Reagan as Rick. Jesus, it's unfathomable. What *would* it have been like? I can't believe it still would have been the most popular movie Warner Brothers ever made, one of the most popular movies of all time."

"Who knows?"

"You've got to be kidding!"

A tone sounded somewhere and Holloway stopped writing. The tone meant that he was wanted in the front office. Now what was it? he wondered. There hadn't been any serious complaints for a couple of decades, not since he'd finally gotten the hang of programming. He put his pen aside and swiveled around on the high stool, easing off it and looking across the way to where a soft green effulgence outlined the egress portal. He went to it and ducked through, emerging immediately into the front office. Geometric short cut — he never really understood that stuff. Trilby sat there at his solitary desk, a slight metaplasmic shimmer rising from him like heat waves. He raised one eyebrow and one corner of his mouth, an irritating mannerism even though Holloway hadn't seen it in two decades.

"Sit down," Trilby said.

"Sure." Holloway sat.

"How's it going?"

Holloway shrugged. "Okay, I guess. It gets kind of tiresome wielding that



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pen. When are we ever going to get those new computers I keep hearing about?"

"Soon," Trilby said abstractedly.

Holloway smiled sardonically. He was tempted to ask what "soon" meant in the context of eternity, but let it pass. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Got another error," Trilby said. "I thought we'd caught 'em all from back when you were apprenticing, but we've had one of the first computers to come in double-checking the Forties and it picked up another. A dilly!"

"Yeah?" Holloway folded his arms and settled back somewhat defensively. He hoped he wasn't going to be lectured again. What did they want from him? Way back in the beginning he'd told them he didn't think he had an aptitude for this kind of stuff. The truth was, he'd rather do janitorial work. There wasn't that much litter here anyway. Responsibility had never been his strong point.

"Yep, a humdinger," Trilby said, his expression becoming more serious.

"Are you sure it's mine?" Holloway asked. "That other guy, what's his name, Swanson, pulled a couple of prime boners before they transferred him, remember?"

"It's yours," said Trilby firmly. "You did all of Hollywood, '42, did you not?"

Holloway frowned.

"Do you know what's going on in the USA these days?" Trilby asked.

Holloway shrugged. "I pick up an occasional flash. I never cared much for history."

"Obviously," Trilby said, and his sarcasm was so evident Holloway felt a twinge. "You know anything about the political picture?"

"Not much."

"The administration?"

Holloway shook his head.

"The *Reagan* administration," Trilby said with particular emphasis. "Ronald Reagan is the president of the United States. But...."

Holloway detected unusual portent in Trilby's voice and found himself bracing slightly for the next words.

"... he *shouldn't* be, Holloway. In no rational scheme of things could a man like Ronald Reagan be elected to such an office. Not even on Earth. Reality does have its limitations, after all. On occasion some extreme errors have gotten through the program — the coelocanth, for example, the whole damned Bermuda Triangle mess, which we're still trying to untangle. But this one is a unique dilly, by any standard. Do you have any idea how this guy became president?"

Feeling a premonitory tingle of apprehension, Holloway shrugged.

"Well, I've got some rough idea of what happened," Trilby said. "It isn't entirely your fault, I guess.... Do you remember that Anglo-Spanish feeder


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you were working with back then before they sent him out?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, somehow between your transcription and his instructions you both did this: Reagan, who was supposed to star in the movie *Casablanca* in 1942 ended up instead in the White House in 1980. You know what *Casablanca* means, don't you?"

Holloway felt suddenly queasy. "Uh, yes...."

Trilby smiled half-heartedly, but there was no real conviction of humor in it. "Boy, do I have my ass in a sling on this one." He shook his head. "The Spanish have another phrase — *que sera sera.* But it doesn't apply here. The problem is, you see, this guy thinks he's in a movie — the movie he should have been in — and he's overacting terribly. It really started to get bad after he survived the dramatic assassination attempt. And he's dangerous, Holloway, dangerous...."

Holloway noticed what seemed to be little beads of sweat on Trilby's forehead. It was an amazing thing, because he hadn't seen sweat in over a century.

"What can we do?" Holloway asked.

"We can't do anything," Trilby said. "Not — not until the next election, which we can doctor. You see, people are actually starting to like this guy. The problem is...."

Holloway was listening intently.

"Do we *have* until the next election?"

They exchanged an ominous look.

"Jesus," Trilby said, after a while. "Couldn't you have made a nice simple error — say, turning Walt Disney into a child molestor?"

"I'm sorry," Holloway said, meaning it.

Trilby sighed.

"Is ... is that all?" Holloway asked after another long silence.

"No," Trilby said. "I'm putting you on janitorial. Clean up your desk. Take the rest of the day off."

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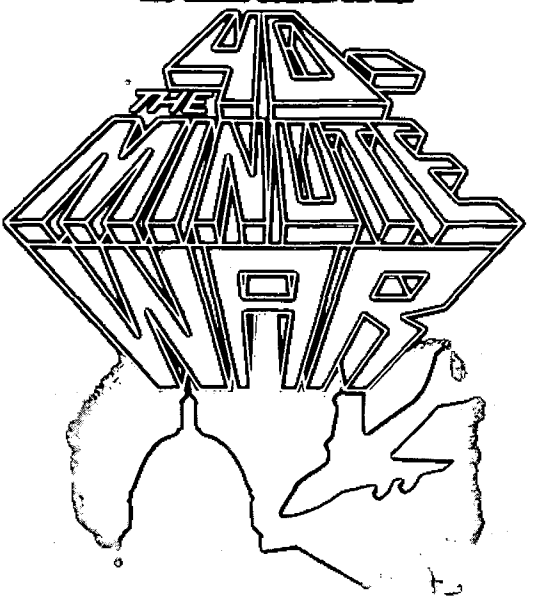


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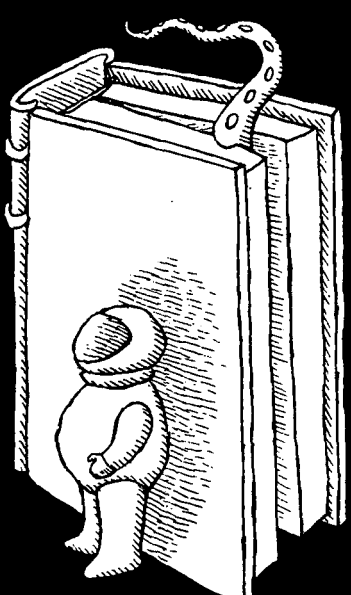
# Books

## ALGIS BUDRYS



*The Dune Encyclopedia,* Dr. Willis E. McNelly, Berkley, $9.95

*The Creature Features Movie Guide,* John Stanley, Warner, $7.95

*The Stars Are the Styx,* Theodore Sturgeon, Bluejay, $6.95

*The Darkangel,* Meredith Ann Pierce, Tor, $2.95

I went to the ABA this year. That's the annual American Booksellers' Association convention. It happens over the Memorial Day weekend, and as early as Thanksgiving publishing people will be saying "Going to the ABA?" or "See you at the ABA," and they all try to have something special to show at the ABA. This year, it was, once again, an ABA at which SF figured prominently, and in an instructive way.

I was there on behalf of the announcement of *Writers of the Future,* an anthology of stories by "new and amateur writers" who have placed in the continuing quarterly contest sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard. I'm one of the intermediate judges — I don't see absolutely everything that comes in, and I don't pick the winners — but I'm a pleasant-enough fellow, so they put my name on the cover in propinquity with Theodore Sturgeon's and Roger Zelazny's.

*Writers of the Future* will be published, quite soon now, by Bridge Publications, which also publishes the paperback of Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth,* along with *Dianetics* and a raft



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of other non-SF by LRH. Bridge does everything full-bore, so there was a Bridge exhibit booth inside quite near the main entrance, and moored by guy-wires to the parking lot out front was a thirty-foot inflated purple Psychlo named Terl.

Terl is an alien invader from *Battlefield Earth.* You couldn't miss him as your cab or bus pulled up. Once inside, you could find several somewhat smaller Terls — the ten-foot models, inflated by vacuum-cleaner, and the balloons, which were inflate-it-yourself models. You could do that while wearing your green pixie hat with the long feather in it, which you could get from a company pushing a book called *The Peter Pan Principle,* but your lips might be sticky from the hard candy being given away by the cookbook company up the aisle. If your eyes bugged out, it might be because of the lady body-builder going through her posing routine a few booths away. You kind of had to talk over people's shoulders and peer around some intervening billboards to follow her shameless and undignified display, but you could do it, all right. Sadly, I forget the name of her book, but thus we have momentarily segued out of SF and toward something of how the ABA is *en gestalt.*

(I also do not remember the name of Raquel Welch's fitness guide. But the poor dear must chafe terribly in the exercise outfit shown in the poster photographs.)

To soothe the fevered brow, Zebra Books, which publishes a lot of titles called *Love's Excruciating Interminability,* had an oasis. Complete with many, many potted plants and other romantic greens, it featured a twenty foot cascade-fountain, which dribbled — rather than cascaded — incessantly from one oyster shell down to the next — a pretty sound, hour after hour. The nearest ladies' rest-room was clear across the exhibition hall, and the nearest men's was one flight up and normally closed for cleaning.

Frank Herbert was there. Frank has shaved off his beard but is still the author of the *Dune* series, which had as you know resulted in what was, as of May, a forthcoming forty-million-dollar movie. Poor damn Frank had to spend the afternoon beside a prop costume from the film, getting photographed. The gimmick was you get an instant Polaroid of you and Frank, and Frank would autograph it to you while smiling and saying "Next!" and the PR man was reloading his camera. Another PR man would have your print in your hand before the color had hardly started to show, and Frank would be standing there smiling into the lens with the next in line. The ever-renewed knot of candidates for this purpose created a semi-permanent total stricture of the Putnam/Berkley or is it Berkley/Putnam and whatever happened to HBJ/Playboy/Ace booth. They are going to



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have to take that smile off Frank with paint remover, or else he'll need to re-grow the beard.

The crowd around Raquel Welch in the flesh was also doing some serious elbowing to get her autograph. In person, Ms. Welch wore a conservative, modish afternoon frock and a strong hint of the expression Frank was keeping in. Over in one of the official autograph booths, however, James Kilpatrick — you know him; the one who's grumbling about the language all the time, and otherwise making unreasonable demands on the educational system and people who claim to have passed through it — was obviously having a wonderful time signing out copies of his new book about it. He's probably not as bored with being stared at, but then he's perhaps never been photographed in a white exercise costume.

When Herbert set up shop beside him, Kilpatrick's *joi de vivre* waned. You could see his eyes rolling sideward, and a growing frown of disbelief, as they lined up in their hundreds for Herbert's signature on the latest *Dune* book. The line snaked on and on, old friends greeting each other and chatting amiably; no surliness, no panic, but on and on and on. They say twenty thousand people cycled through the ABA that day, and I will bet you perhaps one or two left without a signed *Heretics of Dune*.

The thing to remember was that these were not ordinary mopes like me and you; these were bookstore owners and managers, and probably some rival exhibitors as well. To see this processional adjunct to the earlier flocking behavior at the photo opportunity is to realize the full extent of the gratitudes inspired by someone with Herbert's ability to put fast-moving product on the shelves. Which is not to say the *Dune* series does not also contain some good reading, but what it contained at the ABA was long-term reliability, and don't you forget it, aspiring youngsters.

Well, onward. The big thing at any trade show is giveaways. The ABA program lists the "specialty of the booth" for each exhibitor. The real specialty of the booth, of course, is an order form, casually displayed in the iron grip of a salesperson. But what brings the prospective buyer — the bookstore owner — to the publisher's booth is the gimmick. (Heaven forfend anyone should depend on the product to do the trick on its own merits.)

A favorite specialty of late is tote bags. Tote bags come in paper, heavy paper, plasticized paper, plastic, and even fabric, including flimsy fabric, heavy fabric, basted fabric and double-stitched fabric. Each, of course, carries a publisher's logo in a design of some prominence, and some are pre-loaded with catalogues and sales literature. At the Ballantine/Del Rey booth, I picked one off the bilaterally symmetrical rack and the whole



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dingus promptly crashed over, unbalanced by this action. Judy and Lester, on the other hand, were very much on an even keel, and saying smart, good things about their new Heinlein. I got a cover proof and, in due course in the mail, a galley proof. We shall discuss the book next time; looks good as of Chapter Two.

Meanwhile, the best greed-fulfilling technique was to lay out a course up the aisles according to tote-bag size, and stuff your previous tote bag, with any other contents, into your new tote bag. At lunchtime, you scoot back to your hotel, drop your cargo, come back, and start over. There is plenty to choose from, not all of it so bulky as to make you overweight on your airplane baggage allowance. Sadly, my wife has just learned from reading this that I nevertheless passed up the opportunity to make her the tote bag mavenne of Evanston, IL.

Acropolis Books was offering "Free eight-minute make-overs by Clare Miller" to booksellers, as distinguished from other exhibitors, members of the working press, and casuals like me. I did not look deeply into this, though most booksellers have struck me as a conservative lot unlikely to court such opportunities. But another publisher was offering a drawing for a free trip to Alaska. Another dangled Europe; that seemed likelier to attract interest. The American Psychiatric Press was footing dinner for two at a classy restaurant. I have a joke here somewhere about a table-for-two banquet attended by multiple personalities, but I'm not going to tell it.

The cookbook companies were good; besides candy, there were barbecue, wine, and, from the Homestead Book Company of Seattle, sauteed Chinese oyster mushrooms, yum.

All in all, it was a fine time. I had nice white wine and conversation with Susan Allison of Berkley, with Beth Meacham, with David Hartwell who is bringing out his ingenious sort of SF history from Walker, with Rudy Rucker — who asked me to note he did not have a cigarette pack rolled into the sleeve of his T-shirt (Couldn't tell; he had a jacket on.) — with Charles Platt, with Charles Brown, and with Gardner Dozois. I believe contguity of Disclave, the annual Washington convention, had something to do with this heavy stefnal representation, but in truth the ABA every year, now, is a lot like this. And in any event, the party was for Frank Herbert.

Attending it made me late for Anita Bryant's party at one of the other dozen-odd convention hotels. I also completely missed Donald Duck's fiftieth birthday bash, and thus don't know if they had canned orange juice. Anita not only had chilled champagne but a string ensemble playing from her balcony to a generally uncaring crowd in the atrium lobby below.

Ah, the literary life! Going back



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to my hotel, I thought I glimpsed a couple of muses getting into a cab. Their makeup seemed extreme and their skirts were a trifle short, but maybe they had a book coming out.

Just in time, we have Willis E. McNelly's *The Dune Encyclopedia,* a hefty trade paperback containing "all the people, places, history, geography, ecology, battles, births, creatures, customs, sciences, arts, languages, background" AND "everything that is in the books and much, much more!" Must be so; it's 526 pages of reasonably small type only sparsely interrupted by graphics — the "Dune tarot" is striking — and runs from Abomination ("a Bene Gesserit term") to the history of the Zensunni, plus prefaces and appendices.

A massive work of fannish scholarship, it is the "complete, authorized guide and companion" to the series. It will give you a good idea of the flavor here to discover that the Introduction is written by Hadi Benotto, Editor, in the year 15540, and that the material is translated from record-containing crystals found when accident uncovered a trove of data hitherto secreted by the Emperor.

I am sure the basic data does in fact annotate the Herbert texts, McNelly being a meticulous researcher, but the largest appeal of the book doubtless derives from these apocryphal overtones. So be it; another thing for the store, made around a core of real merit. Who can knock it?

Another summer trade paperback is John Stanley's *Creature Features Movie Guide,* compiled by the TV host of a Los Angeles film show. It does not eschew the poster-photo of Ms. Welch from *One Million Years B.C.,* and another good one goes with *Astro Zombies.* Based on recent observations, I have news for Women's Lib — a lot of work remains to be done.

More or less the standard sort of book of its kind, this one seems more thorough than some, and the comments included in the listings seem knowledgeable, comparatively sober, and informative, as distinguished from the jaded or froth-headed "insider" tone taken by some competitors who are perhaps less actually inside than Stanley is. There is a good Fritz Leiber intro, and a booster blurb from Bob Bloch which seems deserved, and I think all in all this is a reasonable reference book for SF film fans and cassetteers to acquire.

It does fail the Budrys test; the synopsis of *Who?* is crucially inaccurate. But the suggestion that the movie ought to have been called *Why?* is one I can go along with.

Theodore Sturgeon was down at the ABA as well, and I have a color photograph of him pointing up at Terl's kneecap. I have known Ted since 1952, and thus I can testify that he is clearly aging at a far slower — in


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fact, an indetectably progressive — rate than the rest of us are.

A good likeness of him as he appears now, and as he has been appearing since the 1930s, I guess, may be found on the cover of Bluejay Books' *The Stars Are The Styx,* a collection of stories you have to have. Because the fact is that Sturgeon is a key figure in the development of mid-century SF and these stories, originally collected in 1979, fall bang across the 1950s.

There are, I guess, five Sturgeon periods, beginning with his earliest days at *Astounding* and in *Weird Tales* ... well, that's two, simultaneous. Then there was Wartime Sturgeon, again in *ASF* but this time with "Killdozer" and "Thunder and Roses" which, though post-WWII (and pre-WWIII) have a darker, harsher texture. Then there were the stories for *Galaxy,* including the title yarn which appeared in *Galaxy*'s first issue, and those are what's here. That's fourth-period Sturgeon, in which the action frequently moved off Earth or involved intelligent (and very emotional) beings from well away, and marks the first time Ted habitually looked beyond the confines of the Solar System. The very title of the archetypical story signals some sort of breakover point within the man.

The man is *sui generis* — very smart, very talented with the word, very exasperating. I'm still counting periods as I go along, and I'm now up to eight, so will cease. The stories here, which with another writer would have culminated in a sweeping intergalactic novel, were instead following in time by *Venus Plus X* and *Baby is Three,* as well as *Some of Your Blood,* three of the damnedest books you will ever read, plus *I, Libertine.*

Years and years ago, Damon Knight spoke of quicksilver in speaking of Sturgeon, and I had thought this might be hyperbole. Sturgeon in truth lives a hyperbolic life, and this in itself has often been sufficient to encloud sharp consideration of his effect on the field. But as I read these stories again — "The Education of Drusilla Strange," "Rule of Three," "The Claustrophile" and the rest — I became possessed of these convictions: That Sturgeon is a major — and often devastatingly entertaining — SF writer and a potentially crucial writer for students of all 20th century American literature; that Sturgeon's whole work so far has never yet been at all effectively studied, for all that Ray Bradbury learned golden bushelsful from second-period Sturgeon; that nothing Sturgeon says about his own work, including his introductions to these stories, is directly helpful in understanding where they really come from, or what it says about SF that he had them published as genre SF.

Quicksilver. He fits everywhere, in a ripple of motion. But what is the shape of what fits everywhere?

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A book I think Sturgeon may have influenced heavily is Meredith Ann Pierce's *The Darkangel.* Originally a 1982 Atlantic Monthly Press book, it's now out from Tor in mass paperback, and I think it's time you had one.

Aeriel lives on the Moon, whose air is fading. On the heights lives the wampyre, and comes and takes her. Taken, she dwells with him, leaves him, comes back to him. Dark, he is the obverse of light; soaring, he falls, an Icarus of the Sun's pale lover. Bridal in his palace, Aeriel moves through stony collonnades, a figure in an Escher drawing. Outside, in quest of ... well, what are we all in quest of ... Pierce suddenly brings her out into a golden, life-repleted universe full of amazing, often charming creatures who aid or attempt to deter her, before she returns to her angel to kill him ... or not.

But I am in some danger of waxing poetic here; of suggesting that this book is a marvelous tissue of allusions and evocations which cannot be described in terms of plot events and yet are spun from the stuff of the plot events. The thing I worry about, you see, is that with a writer like Sturgeon, or with Pierce if she goes on like this, clever people will tick off all the plot events and produce scores of stories "just like these," and they will be nothing, nothing like.

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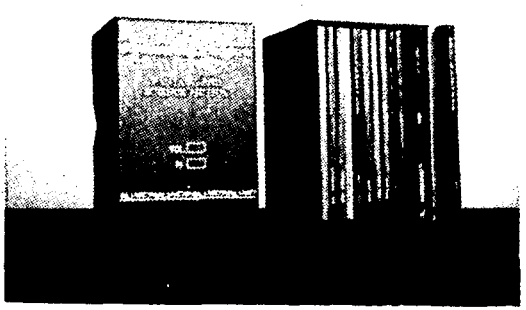

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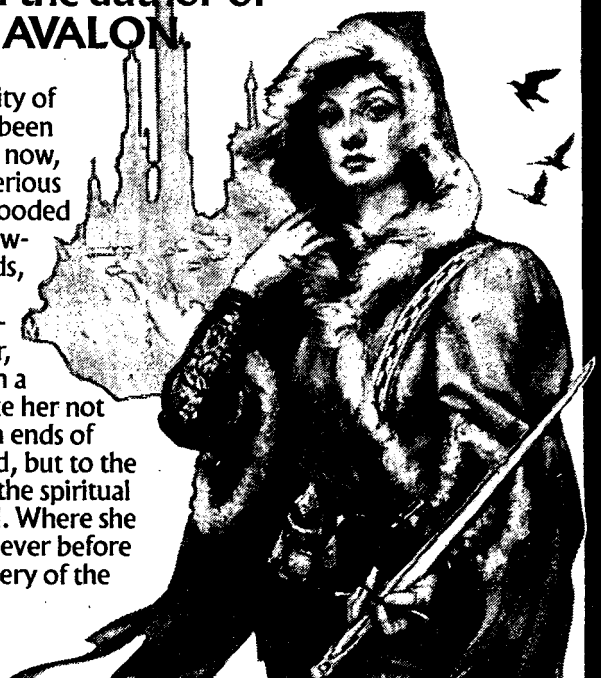

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*In Jane Yolen's first story here since "The Undine" (September 1982), we learn the difference between the smash-and-grab variety of roguery and true finesse...*

# The Five Points of Roguery

BY
**JANE YOLEN**

*The land of Dun D'Addin is known for its rogues, though how so many could have been crowded into so small and homey a place has never been explained. Dun A'Addin is really only one great hill, a land cast off from its neighbors by its height. Folks there live On-the-Hill, By-the-Hill, Over-the-Hill, and ones still on the run from the law live Under-the-Hill, and it gives them all a rather lumpish disposition.*

*There are no main streets, only rough paths most often laced with vines: thornbush and prickleweed and the rough-toothed caught-ums. The trees tend to grow sideways away from the hill, dropping the wrinkled and bitter fruit into the borderlands.*

*Dun D'Addin is a place meant to be passed over or passed through or passed by on the way to somewhere else, and that is why there is only the one inn, atop the hill, called — perversely — the Bird and the Babe, though it has little to do with either. It is in that inn, before the great central hearth, that the hill's resident rogues gather and try to outwit one another with their boasting tales. They are rather pathetically proud of their reputation for roguery, but it is really only of the smash-and-grab variety. True finesse is, I am afraid, quite beyond them — as they found out one evening in front of the fire at the Bird and the Babe, to their eternal chagrin and everlasting regret.*

"There was an old fiddling tune called 'Nine Points of Roguery' in the land I came from," said Sly-fingered Jok. "But of course that's absurd."

"Why?" asked the Innkeeper. He knew his role in these discussions.



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He had a positive genius for keeping conversation, especially brag-tales, flowing. That genius consisted mainly of asking one-word questions at the right time.

"Why? Because I can think of only five," said Jok. "And you have to agree that I am about as roguish a fellow as you are likely to meet in the highways and byways of Dun D'Addin."

The men at the hearthfire chuckled, each of them silently thinking himself the greater rogue. And besides, Dun D'Addin's highways were crackled with grass, and the byways ruts of mud both in and out of the rainy season.

Innkeeper used his silence to bless Jok. Chuckling men are drinking men, was his thought. He made his money without roguery but by supplying vast quantities of ale to the listeners and supplying to travelers a few straw pallets and a thin blanket for the night.

One florid fat man, a stranger and obviously a merchant by his garb, put up his finger. It was missing the top knuckle. The bottom two signed grotesquely at the Innkeeper. "Drinks around," said the merchant. "I want to hear about these five points of roguery, especially from the mouth of a rogue."

"Point one," said Jok, smiling and then sipping on his ale, "is the Eye." He winked at them all and they gave him a laugh.

"Eye?" asked the Innkeeper, right in rhythm.

"The Eye," said Jok. "It must be clear and bright and honest-seeming, and never a wink between you and your Pick." Then he winked again, more broadly this time, and laughed with them.

The listeners settled back in their chairs. The fat man grunted as fat men will, rooting around in his chair like a pig in wallow, but at last he, too, was ready. Jok, staring at him openly, patiently, waited to begin.

### *One: The Eye*

There was a man, a constant traveler and purveyor of goods not quite his own, if you take my meaning (said Jok), who through a great misfortune had been maimed in the war. But he turned this to his own profit, as you will see. A man who can do that could be king, though his kingdom be no more than a cherrystone and his people only ants.

(Though his kingdom be no more than a muddy hill, said the fat man under his breath, and his people no more than rogues.)

He had, in his travels, acquired a diamond the size of a knuckle, and its original owner, the local high sheriff, was not pleased at its disappearance. The borders of the land were sealed, and at every turning, armed men were posted in pairs to search travelers — and one another — to find the precious jewel.



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In the course of their searchings, they had uncovered many a thief and villain, and the trees along the borderlands were festooned with bodies, since thievery was rewarded with hanging in those times. It was a heavy harvest.

But that did not worry our traveler. He boldly stepped up the line and had himself searched. With a steady eye, he winked at one soldier and let them rip through the innocent seams of his coat. They even cored his apple and examined the pips. He thanked them for preparing his meal and waved as he walked through the orchard of ripe souls. He was careful not to run.

And when he got to the other side of the dark wood, where Dun D'Addin's hill began, he smiled. Then he popped out the staring false eye into his hand; the real one had been put out in war. He winkled the diamond from his eye socket and, whistling, went to sell the jewel at an eye-catching price to the Fence-Who-Lives-On-The-Hill.

"Did he really?" asked the Innkeeper, forced to use three words instead of one but still sure of the bargain.

"I knew a man with a blind eye once, but never a socket that could glitter like that," said a listener. "And I've lived in Dun D'Addin all my life, high on it, as they say." He slapped his thigh. He was a storekeeper by trade and a gambler by inclination and thus poor at both.

Jok smiled at the storekeeper, at the Innkeeper, at the fat man a-wallow in the chair, and then at his newly filled glass, but did not answer. Instead, he took a sip of his drink.

"That was a bit of a joke rather than a pointer," said the florid fat man. "I expected more." He signed again with his mutilated hand.

"Wounded in the war, sir?" asked Jok at last, staring at the hand without flinching.

"No," said the fat man. "Caught it in my uncle's till when I was but a boy. I've learned a lot since." He smiled. "But I've come up on the hill, to the home of prosperous thieves, to learn more. So — what is your second point of roguery?"

Jok stared at the grotesque hand with the puckered knuckle in place of a nail. "Point two — the Hand," he said. "Fast and mobile and quicker than the eye."

"Quicker than a fake eye?" called out a listener, a miller who had given false weight and been driven out of his town before settling atop Dun D'Addin's hill.

They all chuckled, ready to listen again.

### *Two: The Hand*

There was a surgeon's apprentice, (continued Jok) who lined his pockets with the buying and selling of



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body parts. Hanged murderers, suicides buried at crossroads, and the pickings after battle were his stock-in-trade. He did not traffic in the appendages of steady husbands and faithful wives, but had a rather brisk business along the border of Dun D'Addin with the sawed-off limbs of felons, miscreants, and malefactors.

Who bought these parts? For the most, it was alchemists and devil worshippers, trespassers in the forbidden zone. I do not think he asked, nor would they have answered him. What he did not know could not hurt, was his motto. His was a grisly but profitable trade.

It happened late one night, when he was applying his singular skill and saw to the body of the late and unlamented Strangler of Hareton Heath, a corpse that had one leg shorter than the other because — it was said — he had lived so long on Dun D'Addin's hill, that there came a loud knock on the door, a veritable drum roll of knuckles.

Startled, the surgeon's apprentice cried out.

"Who is there?" His voice was an agony of squeaks.

"Open in the name of the king's own law." came the call.

It was, of course, too late to hide the evidence of his night's work, for that was spilled all about him. And there was no denying his part in it. Evisceration is a messy business; it leaves its own bloody calling cards. Gathering his wits about him — and leaving the late Strangler's on the table — he donned his black coat and black hat, a midnight disguise.

Just as he slipped out the back door, the king's law broke down the front.

The lead dragoon spotted the hand of the surgeon's apprentice still on the doorknob. Grabbing onto the hand, the dragoon cried out, "Sir, I have him."

That, of course, is when the hand came off in his, for it was the Strangler's hand, hard and horned from its horrible vocation. The apprentice had carried it off with him for just such an emergency.

The soldier, being an honest sort, screamed and dropped the severed claw. In the ensuing melee, the apprentice escaped. It is said he climbed Dun D'Addin in a single breath and was on the far side before he thought to stay. And here he had plied a similar trade — but that is only a rumor, and not one that I, at least, can vouch for.

"I'll give you a hand for that tale," cried out a lusty listener, the local butcher, clapping loudly but alone.

Jok smiled and bowed his head toward the applause. "So point two is the Hand."

The fat man sighed. "And I expected more from you than yet another joke. I suppose point three is the same?" He scratched under his eye with the mutilated finger.



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Jok, fascinated, could not stop staring at him. "No," he said at last. "As a matter of fact, point three is *very* serious."

"Three!" said the Innkeeper, suddenly remembering his role in the affair. "Three!"

"Point three," Jok said, tearing his gaze from the fat man and looking again at his audience, which had enlarged by four or five drinkers, much to the Innkeeper's satisfaction. "Point three is the Voice. In roguery, that voice must be melodic and cozening but, in the end, forgettable."

*Three: The Voice*

Ellyne was the fairest girl on any of Dun D'Addin's borders, the fairest in seven counties, if one were to be exact. Her hair was red and curled about her face like little fishhooks ready to catch the unwary ogler. Her skin was the color of berried cream, rosy and white. Not a man but sighed for her, though she seemed oblivious to them all.

One day she was walking out in the woods, not far from the hill, picking bellflowers for a tisane and listening to the syncopations of the birds, when a rogue from Dun D'Addin chanced by.

Now his name was Vyctor, and he was known Under-the-Hill as The Voice, for he could cast the sound of it where he willed. It was his one great trick, that mellifluous traveling tone. With it he had talked jewelers out of their gems, good wives out of their virtue, and a judge out of hanging him. He was *that* good.

Vyctor saw the redheaded Ellyne and was stunned, felled, split, and spitted by her beauty. He had heard tell of it, but that had been on Dun D'Addin's byways, where every word is doubled and every truth halved. But those who had praised Ellyne's beauty hadn't sung the smallest part of it properly. Vyctor the Voice lost his — and his heart as well. He began to stammer.

Now Ellyne was used to the stammering of men. In fact, she was of the belief that — except for her own father and a blind singer in her town — all men above the age of puberty stammered. She was an innocent for sure, and not aware of her beauty, for not a man had been able to string three words together to tell her of it.

But if Vyctor could not speak directly to her, he could still talk by throwing his voice, and so he spoke to her from the nearest tree.

"Beauteous maid," the birch began.

Ellyne turned round and about, the movement making her hair a halo and bringing a magnificent flush to her cheek. For a moment even the birch stammered; then it went on.

"Beauteous maid, you make my sap run fast; you make my bark tingle. I would embrace you."

Well, Ellyne had never heard a tree



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talk before, and she was fascinated. It was so well spoken, and besides, it was giving her compliments instead of the stuttering and spitting and gawking she was used to from all the men of her acquaintance. She moved closer to hear more.

Vyctor took a step or two in the tree's direction, and the birch continued its serenade.

"My love for you is deeply rooted," said the birch. "Do not ever leaf me."

Ellyne sighed.

Just then the wind came up and blew the birch branches about. One grazed Ellyne's arm. She shrieked — for she was a good girl and not about to be touched before the wedding banns had been posted.

Vyctor leaned forward, his sword suddenly in hand. "I ... I ... I will save you," he cried, forgetting for that instant that the birch was his spokestree. He lay about vigorously and had soon carved up enough firewood to keep the hearths of Dun D'Addin warm for a week.

"Monster!" cried Ellyne. "You have slain my own tree love." She fell upon the woodpile and wept.

From the back she was not as beautiful as the front, and Vyctor came immediately to his senses. Besides, her noisy sobbing had alerted the local dragoons, all of whom were in love with her, and a company of them marched into the woods, bayonets fixed.

Vyctor was arrested and tried, but his Voice having made a full recovery, he was released.

Ellyne carried half a dozen of the finest birch branches home and placed them tenderly over her mantel. Then she took the surname Tree. She was careful not to burn wood or eat vegetables thereafter, and wore widow's weed the rest of her life.

The laughter that greeted Jok's third tale signaled another round of ale. Innkeeper was just pouring, when the miller said, "If that's three, what's four?"

Jok smiled. "Eye, Hand, Voice," he said slowly, ticking them off on the fingers of his left hand. "But the fourth point of roguery is...."

"*The Great Escape!*" came a voice floating back from outside. Then the door snicked shut.

"The Great Escape," Jok agreed. "Now there was a rogue...."

"My purse!" cried the man closest to the fire. "It's been cut!"

Jok turned white and held his hands out in front of him. staring as honestly as he could at the accusing man. "I am not the culprit, sir. Look. I am clean. I stand here empty." He turned out his pockets.

Every man in the inn, used to the ways of Dun D'Addin, did the same.

Innkeeper came to the center of the circle of men and looked around. Someone was missing. It was the fat, florid merchant with the maimed


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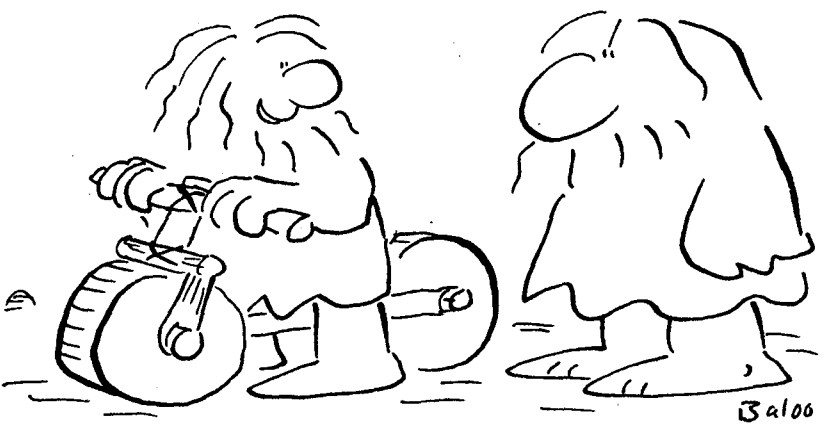
hand. He was gone. And *all* their purses were gone as well.

*Of course Slip-fingered Jok never told this final part of the tale. Even if he had known it, it would not have helped his reputation as a rogue. But in a nearby land, in a larger inn, known perversely as the Eagle and the Child, though it had nothing to do with either, a rather florid thin man, lying back on the very pillows that had lent him substance, told this tale to me, naming the points of roguery on his fingers. But he lacked one finger, and therein lay his own miscalculation, for I relieved him of his pants and purse when he thought to make a long and interesting night. And so I end the tale. For the first three points of roguery may be Eye and Hand and Voice, and the fourth the Great Escape. But the fifth and final point, which every* true *rogue knows well, is the Last Laugh. And I have often been complimented on the engaging quality of mine.*




*"I don't know why, but when I ride on this thing, I feel even* more *primitive."*



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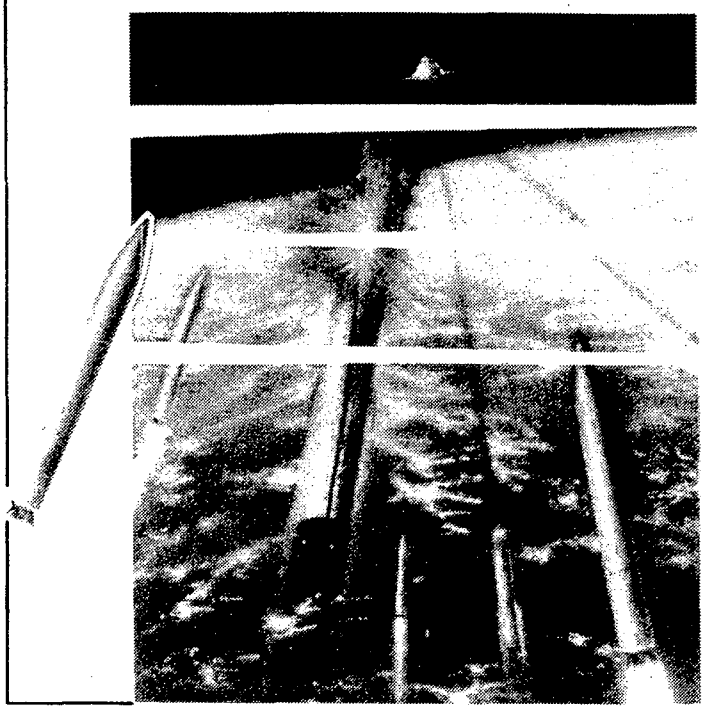

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*Barbara Owens' last story here was "Precious Thing," December 1983. Her new story concerns an advertising man who looks for a respite from his high-pressure job and finds it in a mysterious club that offers a choice of fantasy environments.*

# The Doors

BY
**BARBARA OWENS**

Summer was savaging the city — eighteen straight days of temperatures in the nineties and humidity high enough to curdle brains. Heat softened asphalt, loosened reality, and drained souls. Chicago sweat, seething on the verge of meltdown.

In the back of the cab hurtling up Lake Shore Drive, Charlie Raymond nursed his headache, brooding into the darkness falling over Lake Michigan. Heat lightning shuddered along the horizon. Charlie's shirt clung wetly to him. What a life, God, what a lousy life.

Once inside his air-conditioned high-rise, he stripped to his underwear in the foyer, kicking sticky clothing from him.

It had been a new high in ugly scenes, even for Bo Wilson. O.K., so Charlie was having trouble getting a handle on the new campaign. Well, he wasn't called the agency's wonder boy for nothing. He was heading for the top in advertising, and Bo knew it. Jealous — the old man saw Charlie coming and he was terrified for his own tail.

Charlie poured a cold one, set a demo bottle of His Majesty's Ale on the table, and slumped before it. The pompous gold-on-purple label made his stomach roll.

"Pirates, Charlie?" Bo had sneered, smoothing the puny moustache he'd affected since landing the account. Charlie was certain Bo thought it gave him a European air.

"This is the result of your celebrated fertile brain? Scabby lice-infested criminals to represent a product we want smothered in prestige? What will the TV spots be — a warble of 'Yo ho ho and a paper cup of His Majesty's Ale'?"



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Eventually, Bo's ridicule always crumbled him. "The public remembers humor," Charlie had ended up mumbling. "They'll go for the reverse snobbism. That's the idea here."

There'd been more, none of it pretty. It ended with Bo's implicit warning to get his act together or be out on his butt. Charlie had slunk from the conference room, headache gnawing.

Friday. He rubbed his aching eyes. He had until Friday to slide a brilliant new layout across Bo's polished desk. He stared at the gold and purple label until it blurred, and nothing, absolutely nothing, stirred anywhere in his celebrated fertile brain.

Midnight passed before he knew it. Several cold ones had fallen by the wayside — still he had nothing. The headache raged. Charlie packed it in, pausing for a quick riffle through the mail. Bills; letter from his sister in Omaha; a slim envelope addressed to him by name, not Resident, which, upon opening, revealed a single creamy sheet letterheaded THE DOORS. "An innovation," it advised him, "in entertainment and adventure. Indulge heroic fantasies in a live environment. Be the person you've always wanted to be."

Charlie read it all, squinting through the headache. He had to admire the ambiguously enticing prose. It hooked without giving anything away, a universal appeal: "Be the person you've always wanted to be." The address was a respectable one on the north fringe of the Loop. He left the letter lying on the dinette table and fell into bed.

Friday. He had until Friday noon. Damn Bo Wilson and the pleasure he took in making men crawl.

Charlie woke thinking about THE DOORS, and he read the single sheet again over juice and coffee. Probably a rip-off joint. What made it sound so appealing? He slipped the folded sheet into his jacket pocket and had read it three more times before he appeared in Anne Clayton's office door just before lunch.

"Hi." Anne looked up from her cluttered desk. "Where have you been all morning?"

Charlie grinned. "Hiding from Bo. We still on for tonight?"

"You bet. Want to come to my place? I'll even cook."

Charlie touched the paper in his pocket. "Let's eat out. Then I've got an idea for something — different. Tell you later, O.K.?"

"O.K. How's it coming with His Majesty's Ale?"

"Don't ask. Please, please don't ask."

Over dinner Anne read the sheet. He watched a frown deepen over her eyes.

"I don't know, Charlie. It doesn't tell me enough. Maybe it's kinky."

"I don't think so. Doesn't come across that way. Come on, if it doesn't look right, we'll leave."



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"Well—" She wavered. "You're such a kid. Every circus that comes to town, right?"

"You know me. The original fun-loving boy. Let's go."

The cab deposited them in front of a worn brick building, indistinguishable from its neighbors except for a small open lobby and a discreet sign over its entry labeled THE DOORS.

"Looks like an old theater," Anne said uncertainly. "I don't see anyone going in."

True. The usual pedestrian crunch flowed past them and traffic filled the street, but the lobby was empty, only a shadow in the ticket cage indicating something was open for business inside.

Charlie felt mildly surprised at his rush of eagerness. "Hey, so what? We'll have it to ourselves. Come on, I promise, anytime you want to leave, say so."

The girl selling tickets was gorgeous, hair long and smoky, the greenest eyes Charlie had ever seen.

"Enjoy yourselves," she said, smiling.

Charlie willingly smiled back. "What's this all about? Your flyer's pretty vague. Give us an idea of what goes on in there."

She shook her head. "Just go through the center door. Mr. Hunter, the manager, will answer questions, O.K.?"

Anne lagged behind him across the lobby. "I'm not sure about this, Charlie. I don't think I want to do it."

"Why? You're usually game for anything."

"I know, but—"

They stepped into a vast rectangular room, and as the door whispered shut behind them, Charlie was almost overpowered by the sensation of space and light. Everything — floor, walls, and ceiling — was white. Milky, opalescent, the room enveloped him, shimmering with pastel hints playing just below the surface. He experienced a moment of disorientation, drifting on an encompassing flow, then his feet touched carpet and he lowered his eyes, anchored to a stripe of thick violet pile bisecting the room to its far wall, an impossible distance to calculate because of the majestic whiteness of the room.

Anne made a small sighing sound, her fingers tight around his. "Kind of takes your breath away." Her voice was lost in the reaches of the room.

"It's magnificent," Charlie said, and he was walking — down the violet runner, into the heart of the room. Past doors set at precise distances on either side. Brightly lacquered, shocking in their contrast to the milky walls they occupied — gold, deep blue, black, forest green, silver gray, blood red, and more. Their effect blurred Charlie's vision. The coolness of the white room flowed over him, and the man waiting in the center stepped forward and held out his



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hand. He wore a tuxedo; his hair was thick, matching the milky color of the room, and his smile was warm.

"Welcome to THE DOORS."

Charlie clutched his hand. "It's — it's overwhelming, isn't it? Are you Hunter? Hey, what kind of place *is* this?"

Hunter released Charlie's hand. "Maybe a bit too dramatic, but that's the purpose of fantasies, isn't it?" His brown eyes crinkled when he smiled. "THE DOORS is dedicated to rescuing its customers from the real world, if only briefly, allowing them to indulge in secret dreams. You won't be disappointed with your experience here, I promise you." He glanced past Charlie's shoulder. "Would the young lady care to join us? I'll explain something of what you can expect behind the doors."

Charlie had forgotten Anne. She still stood inside the entrance door; when Charlie beckoned, she came slowly toward them down the violet runner. Charlie grinned, reaching for her hand.

"We go behind them, is that it? What happens then?"

"Just one. Only one door per visit. Now, behind each one lies an environment as nearly resembling the door's color as we can create. A situation is in progress there in which you may participate to any degree you choose. In other words, you direct your own adventure." He paused. "I'm afraid I can't tell you more without spoiling your fun."

Charlie's fingers were tingling. "Sounds fantastic. But is anything dangerous in there? Something that jumps out and scares you half to death?"

Hunter looked amused. "Certainly not! THE DOORS is not a fun house. It's for individual pleasure and entertainment, I assure you. Each customer's fantasy is his own design."

Charlie's eager gaze sped along the walls, gauging each bright door. "All right, I'm sold. Each inside area matches the color of its door, right? Anne? Which one? You choose."

"I'm afraid," Hunter said, "that each of you must go alone. Fantasies are private creations. Rarely can they be shared, isn't that true?"

Anne's hand dropped from Charlie's. She stepped back quickly. "I'm leaving."

Charlie half-turned, still intent on his selection of a door. "What?"

"I'm not going. Please, Charlie, let's get out of here."

He watched her moving quickly toward the entrance. She didn't look back, and he had no choice but to go after her, leaving the magnificent opalescent room. The girl in the ticket cage smiled as he passed. He caught Anne on the sidewalk, and he didn't notice that his hand on her shoulder was heavy.

"I'm sorry," Anne said, but she sounded relieved. "I can't explain — the whole place didn't feel right."

"But, what — I didn't notice —"



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"Let's just go somewhere for a drink and talk, O.K.?"

The doors — those beautiful doors. They'd been within reach. Charlie felt his headache returning.

"No, I guess not," he said stiffly. "I think I'll just take you home."

Once in his apartment, flung sleepless on the bed, he knew his reaction had been childish. To get so stretched out over a silly thing. He'd apologize tomorrow.

Tomorrow. God, one day closer to Bo Wilson's Friday deadline on His Majesty's Ale. Charlie's eyes burned. Goddamn Bo Wilson. He thought of the room — that wonderful soothing room with its promises lying behind closed doors. Away from the real world, living innocent fantasies. Being the person you always wanted to be.

He didn't apologize to Anne. He avoided her, and he avoided Bo Wilson as well. The layout for His Majesty's Ale spread across his desk, Charlie paced his office, head throbbing. Finally, at lunchtime, as thousands of heat-stunned Loop workers straggled into the streets, Charlie crossed the wide sidewalk before the old brick building and stopped before the ticket cage. The girl with the smoky hair and green eyes smiled.

"Hi."

"Hi," Charlie said, not caring about his silly grin. "Guess what? I'm back."

Feeling like a kid at a double-feature matinee, he clutched his ticket and pushed through the door into the great white room. Hunter turned to smile at him from his position halfway down the violet runner. Charlie stumbled in his haste and said loudly, "Green. I've decided on the green."

"Fine," Hunter said, and took the ticket from Charlie's hand.

"You're sure there are no surprises in there?"

"Only pleasant ones." Pulling a small lacquered box from an inside pocket. Hunter withdrew a bright green key. Charlie clutched it eagerly. "Two things you should know," Hunter said. "First, inside each door is the arena where your adventure waits. A narrow corridor encircles it. You'll find suitable costumes there. Choose your role in the encounter —you may leave your street clothes there."

"Costumes?" Charlie said. But the idea seemed only slightly foolish. "Is that necessary?"

"Not at all. But I think you'll find it enhances the realism. Second, you cannot exit through this door. There are several exits from the arena. We ask that you use one of those. Any questions?"

"No." Mouth dry, Charlie started for the green door. "Yes. How long does this — adventure last?"

"As long as you like." The shine in Hunter's eyes seemed to indicate he shared Charlie's excitement. "THE DOORS is here solely for its cus-



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tomers' entertainment. Enjoy your stay, Mr. — ?"

"Raymond," Charlie said. The green key slid smoothly into the lock. "Charles Raymond."

"Ah, yes," Hunter said, and Charlie was inside. The green door closed silently behind him.

The corridor was narrow, high-ceilinged, the same shimmering all-over white. Hanging at intervals along its curve were costumes — an array of simple tunics, capes, gleaming helmets, and breastplates. Knights, Charlie thought with a secret thrill. My God, knights in shining armor. I feel like a fool and I can't wait to see what's inside.

Deciding against heavy armor, he drew on a fawn-colored tunic and long, tight-fitting hose. The sandals were soft leather, laced halfway to the knee. The costume seemed made for him, and after a moment's hesitation, he drew a quiver of arrows over his shoulder and selected a slender, supple bow. It felt good, natural in his hand. Giving brief thanks that no one he knew could see him, he started along the wall to find the way inside. A door, white, set flush into the wall. No handle. It swung inward; eagerly, Charlie pushed. It opened easily, and he stepped through into deep green shadow.

Trees. As his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, he saw he stood in a thick copse of trees. His vantage point suggested a hillside — a lush meadow spread below him, so green in the sunlight he lifted a hand to shade his eyes. The meadow swelled gently into another hillside opposite him, a steep rise thickly studded with boulders. On its slopes, half-hidden in massive trees, a great house stood, stone walls, turreted, awesome in its majestic isolation.

He crouched just inside the corridor door, and gradually his senses cleared. Birds sang, the air was sweet and fresh. Small clouds lazed through a brilliant blue sky. Charlie smelled soil, and flower perfumes and, without taking his eyes from the panorama, he reached for a close-hanging leaf and crushed it in his fingers. It was moist, odor pungent to his nose.

"God," he murmured, straightening slowly. "How did they do this? It looks — it seems absolutely real!"

Any expectations he might have formed could not match this. The old brick building housing THE DOORS was only one in an ordinary city block, yet the landscape stretched before him, endless. If he let himself believe, he was outdoors in a vast green countryside. He pushed away from the trees, into the open. The sun felt real, warm on his face, and a light breeze stirred his hair, drying the nervous perspiration on his skin.

"Fantastic." Charlie half-realized he was moving, down the hillside, over rocky slopes, across a stream whose water was clear and icy to the touch. Now he could see the birds,



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bright flashes of color against the sky. He lifted a smooth stone and tested it — solid, granular, no papier-mâché, and suddenly he was grinning, speeding up his pace. God, how did they do it? It was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen.

He reached the meadow. The grass was real, whispering softly in the breeze. Wildflowers grew in profusion. Charlie tasted it all as he made his way toward the opposite hillside where the grand house stood in its grove of trees.

He became aware of the sound as he reached the first tangled growth on its lower slopes. A rumble, distant, as of warning thunder, and he turned curiously toward it. Horses? In here? Not possible! In the distance, black horses racing toward him from the entrance to the meadow.

Charlie froze. He saw their riders, sunlight blazing off their armor, and he saw swords drawn and ready. His paralysis broke and he dove for the underbrush, bellying into it with his face in the dirt — my God, my God!

But they'd seen him. Hooves pounding, metal clanking, they drew up at the base of the hill, not twenty feet from where he lay. Charlie heard his heart, louder than the heavy hooves. He smelled the animal sweat, heard their nervous pawing, and dug deeper into the hillside. He wanted desperately to go home.

"Peasant!" a deep voice bellowed. "Stand, peasant! Show yourself to Lord Dalby's men!"

Charlie burrowed deeper. The voice came again.

"Peasant! You dare poach on Hillhaven land? Stand, I say, or I will lift you out on the sweet point of my sword!"

Suddenly Charlie remembered where he was. Wait a second — Hunter said nothing could hurt me in here. He said the adventure was of my making. That smiling bastard, did he lie?

Warily, he raised himself to his knees. The four black horses stamped impatiently, but their riders made no move. Slowly Charlie stood, painfully aware of the picture he made, dirt and leaves covering him from nose to toe.

"Uh, listen, guys," he began.

"Silence!" The leader urged his horse forward. "You know the penalty for poaching on Lord Dalby's land?"

The others laughed. Despite his fear, Charlie was struck by their splendor — four strong soldiers against the meadow's green, armor and plumed helmets glistening, lathered horses blowing and prancing under heavy trappings. Something stirred in a dim recess of his brain.

"I wasn't — I'm not —"

The leader lunged. His sword whistled past Charlie's ear, and Charlie's instinct threw him to one side. The horse's massive shoulder brushed him as it passed.



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Again the men laughed, but no one moved further against him. Crouched, Charlie watched them. They're having fun with me. That guy could have taken my head off if he had wanted to. He squinted at the leader's sword, now resting easily at his side. It was dull, not sharpened to a killing edge. Charlie's confidence soared. That's right, this is a fantasy, *my* fantasy. He made a dive for the bow that had fallen in the dirt.

The leader rushed him. Charlie scrambled aside, dropping the bow. The huge horse was almost on him, and, without thinking, Charlie snatched a rock from the hillside and hurled it with all the strength he had. It struck the soldier square on the temple. He swayed, lurched from his saddle, falling heavily almost at Charlie's feet.

There was a moment of total silence. The fallen man didn't move; his companions watched, as though waiting for Charlie's next move. Charlie stared at the man lying on the ground.

"Hey, I didn't mean —"

With a single movement, the three men wheeled, pointing their mounts back toward the meadow's mouth. Thundering hooves echoed from the hillsides. They were retreating! The leader's horse raced after them for a short distance, then stopped uncertainly. Charlie was already moving. He scooped up the fallen soldier's sword and sprinted for the riderless horse, pulling himself easily into the saddle — wait a minute, I never rode a horse before! — and he was after them, leaning into the wind as the great black animal flattened itself into incredible speed. Charlie glimpsed frightened faces peering over shoulders and he let out a battle cry, leaning low over his horse's mane.

The chase went on for hours in glorious exhilaration. Through meadows and forests, over hills and into valleys, Charlie ran the fleeing soldiers. The sun didn't lower in the sky, his mount never tired, and finally Charlie himself reined in and watched the distant figures disappear. He lowered himself from the saddle, and the horse cantered away smoothly, fading gradually into the shadow of the trees.

Charlie fell prone into the grass. He was tired, bone-tired, and he'd never felt better in his life. He glanced at his watch, but it was missing — back in the corridor somewhere with his Chicago clothes. Good God, what a place this was.

A movement shifted at the corner of his eye. Charlie tensed. A girl stood watching him from the shadow of the trees. Her robe was long and flowing, smoky hair in ringlets atop her head. Her eyes were green, the greenest —

Charlie scrambled to his feet. "You — you're the —"

"I'm Adela," she said in a soft voice. "Lord Dalby is my father. I saw his men take flight from you." Some-


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thing like admiration sparkled in her eyes.

"Yeah?" He felt a grin start inside. "Listen, the one that fell, I didn't mean —"

"You're very brave," she said quickly. "What are you called?"

"Charlie — Charles. I'm called Charles." So the dialogue was corny. What the hell — it was his fantasy. Who had to know?

"I must go now." Her glance was shy. "I hope we meet again, Charles."

"You know," Charlie said suddenly, "none of this is possible. I don't know how it's done, but —"

She was gone, melted into the trees. Charlie was alone in the green, green countryside. Tired, victorious, the person he'd always wanted to be. The thought that had stirred earlier in the encounter was surfacing. It was time — time to find the exit and go home.

He remembered finding the small door in the shallow cave near the top of the hillside, but he was so intent on the idea forming that the next thing he knew he was dressed normally, standing in THE DOORS' side alley. It was dark — he'd been inside for hours. Chicago washed over him, raucous, stifling. He felt a twist of longing for the simple green world he'd conquered, but the campaign was designing itself inside his head. It couldn't wait.

Charlie worked through the night roughing it out, finishing in the first pink light. He was waiting at Bo Wilson's door when the older man appeared.

"It's sketchy, but you can get the idea."

Bo's hooded gray eyes swept across the sketches on his desk. Charlie didn't even try to conceal his pride. It was great — four strong horsemen astride sweating steeds, the vivid green meadow behind, sun glinting off armor — re-created just as truly as he could manage on paper.

"Macho but refined, isn't that what you wanted? The guys in the bowling shirts will love it. Show me a man who doesn't secretly want to be a knight in shining armor."

Bo's eyes narrowed at his tone. "It has promise," he said. "Let me look it over. Then we'll talk."

But Charlie had seen a spark of something in those cold, flat eyes. Damn right it had promise. It was a standout and they both knew it. He wanted to laugh. It would make Charlie look good — look *terrific* — and the old man couldn't handle it.

"I was up all night," Charlie said airily. "I'm going home. Catch me there if you want anything."

He felt the eyes on his back, but he didn't care. He was on a high —had come through again. The client was all that mattered. To hell with Bo.

But he couldn't sleep in the cool apartment, high above the noise. He



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ground his teeth and punched his pillow, but he was strung too tight. Glossy lacquered doors opened silently behind closed eyes — welcoming, promising. It wasn't yet noon when he stood before the ticket cage and smiled back at the big green eyes.

"Hello — Adela."

"What?"

"Isn't that your name?"

"Afraid not." Her look was innocent. "It's Karen."

Actors, I'll bet, Charlie thought. They're all actors and can't spoil the customer's illusion.

"Whatever you say."

Fatigue forgotten, he pushed quickly across the lobby and into the cool white room. Hunter waited at his station. Charlie felt a rush of affection, like meeting an old friend.

"So, Mr. — Raymond, isn't it? How nice to see you again so soon."

"Please, it's Charlie. That experience yesterday, I have to tell you, this place is incredible. I have to know how it's done."

Smiling, Hunter shook his head. "Now, you know I can't divulge that. As long as your pleasure was satisfied, that's all we ask."

"Well, it was, it was." His gaze ranged avidly over the double array of doors.

"Which one will you try today?"

All. He wanted them all. The green again — flying across the meadow, power surging through him. No — later. A new one today. He measured each one greedily. Blue. Gold. Black — no, not black. Yellow. Brown. Gray. Red — no, not the red one, either. Gold — rich, metallic. He felt the tingle in his fingers begin.

"Gold. Today it'll be the gold."

The costumes in the corridor intrigued him — faded jeans; tight, sporty T-shirts. He burst through the small white door into a gaudy carnival midway. As far as he could see, music and lights of an amusement park lay ready for his entertainment. The quick rush of sounds and smells brought terrific memories. He laughed aloud. God, how he used to love these things.

Charlie plunged into the crowds and glitter — cheap thrills promised around every corner. He rode the roller coaster, pushed into sideshows, watched people wasting dollars and dreams on every game of chance.

A concessionaire with a world-weathered face sold him a dripping chili dog and frosty beer. At the adjacent booth, a small crowd had gathered, cheering a bearded blond boy throwing hoops at pegs. Charlie drifted closer. From the sounds of excitement, the boy was evidently close to racking up a record score. The barker pointed to a huge stuffed koala bear, and the blond's girlfriend squealed, jumping up and down. The hoop sailed down the boy's hand, caught the peg, and hesitated — even Charlie held his breath. Then the hoop bobbled and fell. The boy slumped, the crowd groaned and turned away.



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Charlie's fingers tingled. Hey, this was *his* fantasy. He shouldered confidently through the crowd.

"Say, buddy, let me have a try."

From the corner of his eye, he watched the blond boy turn from his girlfriend's side as the barker handed Charlie his quota of rings. Charlie grinned at the man. He froze. The hoops slipped from his hands.

"Bo! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Well?" the familiar voice said. "You gonna play or not?"

Charlie just stood. The silly moustache was gone, and he wore several days of gray stubble, but it was Bo, and his face held no sign of recognition. What the hell was going on?

The barker picked up the rings and shoved them into Charlie's hands. Still stunned, Charlie tossed one without looking. It landed true on the peg. The crowd cheered. Feeling lightheaded, he watched each consecutive hoop wing from his hand to the pegs as if it belonged there. The crowd grew. He swelled under their admiration, and finally he had matched the blonde boy's score — the stuffed koala was within his reach.

Charlie hefted the last ring carefully. Its weight was uneven, heavier on one side. He met Bo's flat gray stare, considering. Then he let the ring go. One side tipped the peg, and he thought it might hold, but it didn't. The weighted side pulled it away and it fell. The crowd sighed. Masking a smile, the barker said, "Tough luck. Wanta try again?"

Charlie drew in a long breath. "It's a rip-off. That last hoop was weighted. Seems to me I won that bear."

Bo's eyes glittered. "What you trying to pull? This here's an honest game."

"It was weighted," Charlie said. "Hand it over, and we'll let these people decide."

He felt the crowd close in. Bo's eyes shifted. He hesitated, then reached up slowly to unloose the bear.

"I ain't gonna argue. You want the bear, you got it. We aim to please here, that's the way it goes."

Charlie took the bear and turned to the blond boy's girl. He was only mildly surprised to see smoky hair and wide green eyes.

"Here," he said. "I believe you wanted this."

"Oh, hey, thanks," she said, and giggled. "You sure it's O.K.?"

"As long as your friend doesn't mind."

The boy shrugged, but Charlie thought he saw something flicker in his eyes. "O.K. by me," he said. "Thanks."

They drifted away into the midway, the girl with one lingering green glance. Throwing out his chest, Charlie turned away from the booth, and the man with Bo's face called after him, "Hey, no hard feelings, buddy. Come back again, O.K.?"



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Suddenly Charlie's exhaustion crashed down on him. He remembered finding the exit, and he remembered part of the cab ride home, then nothing until he woke in bright sunlight. He'd overslept, but it didn't matter. He felt great. The memory of Bo's face in the harsh carnival light flooded back — and how sweet Charlie's victory over him had tasted. But how had it happened? What was real and what illusion at THE DOORS?

When he arrived at work, a leisurely two hours late, a summons from Bo lay waiting on his desk. Charlie faced him curiously, but Bo was his usual self — moustached, thin gray hair plastered to his scalp, face colorless, stony. gray. The man was all over gray — Christ, even his fingernails looked gray. Charlie's layout for His Majesty's Ale lay scattered across the desk.

Bo began without preliminaries. "I want a polished presentation on this in one week," he said with a cursory glance. "The client is quite enthused with your approach." He was biting off his words, snapping them across the desk. "They're so enthused there's talk of eliminating spot testing and getting it out to the general public immediately." The cold gray eyes swept up, fastening on Charlie's own. "In spite of yourself, Raymond, you seem to have done it again."

Filled with new confidence, Charlie favored him with a careless smile. "I guess I just got lucky on this one."

A muscle clenched in Bo's tight jaw. "In view of your achievement, Fairchild wants you for a while. He desires to pick your wondrous brains about some kinks in the Diego cosmetics line. Unfortunately, he wanted you first thing this morning. I had to admit I didn't know where you were."

Charlie fought off his usual tendency to crumble. But Bo's force was unsettling. He hates me, Charlie realized suddenly. I'm a real threat to him at the agency, he's in jeopardy here, and he really hates me for it. God, this is like a war. Some of his confidence leaked away.

"I'm sorry, Bo. I'll go see Fairchild now."

Uneasy, he stayed conspicuously at his desk with the Diego account, only to discover late in the afternoon that Bo had not been seen in the office since their encounter. So much for scoring points. As Charlie was pulling things together at closing time, Anne appeared at his office door. Her smile was tentative.

"Hi. I thought maybe you'd left town."

Except in passing, Charlie hadn't seen her since that first aborted visit to THE DOORS. And he'd never apologized for his childish behavior that night.

"Hi," he said guiltily. "I've really been swamped."

"Want to grab something to eat?"

His hands were too busy, scooping papers into his case. "Sorry, I



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can't. Too much work." Anne's level look weakened his smile.

"You're not mad at me, are you? For backing out on that place?"

"What? Hey, no, I'd forgotten it."

Her smile grew teasing. "I bet you went back by yourself."

Charlie straightened, meeting her gaze. "No, I didn't. Too busy. Anyway, it sounded like a dumb idea after I thought about it more."

He reached for his jacket. She didn't move to leave.

"I hear great things are being planned for His Majesty's Ale. You really hit it this time, didn't you?"

"Oh, well — I just needed time." He couldn't just push by her.

"Charlie, can I say something? I've been here longer than you and I've learned some things. Go easy with Bo Wilson. He's been around a long time."

Charlie shrugged. "Too long. He just won't accept that. He's trying to hold me down."

She straightened. Was she finally going to leave? "Well, I'd be careful about pushing him too hard on your way up. Nobody gets by him, Charlie. He has a way of making contenders disappear. Remember Brad Peters? Have you seen or even heard of him since he made a run for Bo?"

Charlie smiled, moving purposefully toward the door.

"I'll get by him," he assured her. "And soon."

The message got to her. She sighed. "Sure, O.K. Must be the heat. It's making us all crazy. Listen, I'll see you tomorrow then, O.K.?"

"Sure."

Finally she was gone. Charlie fled the building. He scarcely glanced at the girl in the ticket cage and he was inside, in the white room, Hunter's face warm with recognition, Charlie's eager fingers receiving a bright blue key.

It was an underwater world. Charlie accepted that — accepted the blue world and the fact that he was a weak swimmer at best. In full diving gear, he led an expedition to explore a sunken galleon, relieved of pressures, reveling in the silence, the peaceful underwater world. They discovered ancient artifacts and precious coins in abundance, and he swallowed disappointment when he found himself back outside in the alley; but on the following day, even the lowly mail boys were vicariously sharing Charlie Raymond's latest triumph — divers find a sunken galleon and discard the golden treasures there, bringing reverently to the surface only one whole preserved bottle of Diego's aftershave.

Charlie missed a full day's work. Behind the yellow door, he walked an alien landscape. Four pale yellow moons threw his crew's long shadows across a wild, weird terrain. He planted the Stars and Stripes in ashen yellow soil, and talked to the presi-


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dent over countless star-studded miles. When a member of his crew confided to the president that the goal of a lifetime had been realized just serving with Commander Raymond, Charlie smiled into the tinted window of her helmet and saw more than respect and admiration in her shadowed green eyes.

Bo lacerated him behind closed doors about his attitude and absences. Charlie walked away with a smile. His Majesty's Ale was pulling in raves from the ad world, and the Diego people wanted him permanently on their account.

The staggering heat wave continued. Charlie found that time spent away from THE DOORS was becoming unbearable. He still avoided some. The gray was not interesting, promising nothing. The black one could mean drifting far into outer space, seeing secrets unknown to man, but it could mean caves and terrifying dark places as well. Once he stood with key ready before the red door, but something turned him away. Red signified heat and turmoil; he had enough of that. Hunter allowed him to substitute the green instead. Charlie entered the pastoral countryside again, dressed as a soldier, astride one of the powerful black steeds.

He led his men in combat against an enemy guard, and soon the rivals were easily being bested. Charlie closed with a young blond-bearded soldier who seemed familiar. Charlie was in a fever of exhilaration. Soon he'd finish the battle and the game would be done. But the bearded soldier wrenched away and his sword whistled. Charlie felt a sharp sting. He faltered, falling back. Bright beads of blood dripped onto the armor at his chest.

"What? Wait, this isn't supposed to — " He felt weak. His hand came away from his cheek splotched with red.

The soldiers on the field had frozen. The bearded one kneed his horse forward; his sword fell. Charlie saw its edges glinting razor-sharp.

"Hey," the soldier said. "I didn't mean — are you O.K.?"

"Sure," Charlie muttered. "A scratch, that's all. I think I've had enough for today."

"Jeez, I'm sorry," the young soldier said, but Charlie was sure he saw a smile before the other turned away.

The slice required five stitches. Charlie presented Bo with an idea for Speedi-Shine, a new account. Bo didn't thank him. Charlie entered the world behind the coppery brown door less than one hour later.

His spirits rose when he saw the costumes. With perverse pleasure, he chose the one each man secretly longs to wear, and he rode across the endless stretches of drab brown rock and mesquite dressed all in black. His horse was mean and rangy, and Charlie wore a pearl-handled .45 slung low on his thigh.


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He smiled grimly when the town's citizens scattered at his approach.

"Waco Charlie! Run! Waco's comin' back to town!"

The sheriff and his deputy stepped into the street and waited. Charlie reined in, grinning down at the face above the dull tin star.

"Afternoon, Bo," he said.

The older man scowled. "I told you I didn't want you in my town."

Charlie sighed, raking the faces peering from every door and window. "I got thirsty," he said softly, and smiled at the green-eyed girl standing half in shadow behind the saloon door. "I need a little fun."

"Let me take him, sheriff," the deputy said.

Charlie eyed him lazily. He was big and blond, eyes hot above a heavy beard. Charlie's fingers began to itch.

"No," the sheriff said. "Not yet. Waco, nobody wants you here."

Charlie glanced at the girl in the saloon doorway. "You sure about that, Bo?" he drawled.

Charlie was faster. He aimed for the boy's gun hand. The deputy fell to his knees, howling; the gun spun through the air and thudded in the dirt.

The townspeople vanished. Hands raised, face impassive, Bo backed away, melting into the shadows of the saloon. The town looked deserted.

Charlie urged his horse to the deputy's side. The boy knelt in the dirt, cradling his wrenched hand. His eyes glittered up at Charlie's cool stare.

"Nice try," Charlie said, and moseyed slowly out of town.

He slept badly, waking with a headache that grew to a roar when he saw Bo's summons lying on his desk. Bo faced him with a wide, colorless smile.

"You screwed up, Raymond," he announced happily. "That crap you handed me yesterday for Speedi-Shine was worthless — the night watchman could do better! Fortunately, I saved it. Now you'll polish it so I can hand it to them first thing tomorrow morning. Make me look good, boy. Get on it — now."

"The hell I will," Charlie muttered. The heat was choking him. His head hurt, he felt half-sick, and he was tired — oh, God, he was so tired.

"I didn't quite hear that."

Charlie ignored the ice in the voice. He snapped. "I said the hell I will!" he heard himself shouting. "Do it yourself! Can you? No! You're done, Bo. No more riding on other guys' successes. You've had it. The big boys know I'm here now. Count your fingers, has-been, your days are numbered. I'm coming — you get out of my way!"

Silence roared in his ears. Oh, man, he'd done it now. And then Bo smiled. Charlie couldn't believe it. Smiled, and when he spoke, his voice was soft.

"O.K., it's all over, Charlie. Get out of my office. Go on."



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Stomach churning, Charlie headed for the door. "Yeah, it's over," he managed shakily. "And I beat you, Bo. You can't do anything about it. I won."

His office seemed smaller. It was stuffy; heat oozed in even through the air conditioning. God, it was hot. Claustrophobic. But the war was over. He'd won. He wasn't afraid of Bo Wilson anymore. He needed to get out, get away. Relax. Now.

The delicate white coolness of the room never failed to soothe him. He stumbled in his hurry down the violet runner.

"Well, Charlie," Hunter smiled. "Which shall it be today?"

"I don't know." Damned headache pounding. "Something — so special —"

He stared at the doors until his eyes smarted, willing one of them to indicate his choice. Placid blue underwater, pale yellow planet, green countryside — none of them right. His cheek throbbed where the stitches held it together. He prowled the room and found himself staring at the blank white wall at the foot of the rectangle.

There was a door — he'd never noticed it before, a white door set flush into the wall. It had no handle, only a keyhole. Charlie touched it and it felt cool, inviting to his touch.

He wheeled on Hunter. "What's this? I never saw this one before."

Hunter watched him. Slowly, he shook his head. "Not that one, Charlie."

Charlie pressed his forehead against it. Cool, so cool. He saw snow, vast expanses of snow — white, pristine. He'd lie in it, bathe in it.

"I want to go behind this door."

"No," Hunter said, but something in his voice said he could be persuaded. "That one's special."

Charlie's teeth clenched. "Special? *I'm* special! One of your best customers, you said so yourself." White blanketed mountains glistened behind his eyes. "I want this one — the white one! Let me in this door!"

Hunter moved toward him slowly. His fingers dangled a small white key.

"I don't know, Charlie — "

Snow. Miles and miles of snow. "Damn it, you're here to please me! Do it!"

"You're right," Hunter said. He bent to insert the key. "I apologize."

The door swung inward. Charlie shoved Hunter aside, flinging it wide. Snow! He burst through with open arms, prepared to fall facedown in the delicious cold stuff.

For the flash of an instant he thought he was falling. There was no corridor, no costumes, he was falling! Arms windmilling, he skidded to a stop. Nothing — he could see nothing, hear nothing. Gloomy, gray — he blinked his eyes to clear them and steadied himself. Not falling, he was —

"What the — "

Sweeping out before him, farther than the eye could fathom, he saw gray. Under his feet, wet gray sand —



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above and around him, low leaden sky. Everything, God, absolutely everything was dull, lifeless gray. And formless. No one could imagine anything so flat — as far as his eyes could see, not a pebble, not one tuft of grass softened the starkness he stood on. It was terrifying. Somewhere out there sky met sand, but no delineation was possible. Charlie stood on a plane devoid of dimension or color. And life. Standing alone, squinting into the gray, Charlie knew something was definitely wrong.

"Hey," he said aloud as the damp chill began to work its way through his clothing. "What's going on?"

He was afraid to move — he'd feel he was falling again. There was nothing to focus on, to hold onto.

"Hey! This is ugly. My God, it's ugly. Where's the color, the people, where's — "

A dark bead appeared somewhere on the plane before him. Charlie clutched his jacket around him and watched it come closer, elongate into a man, moving leisurely through ragged gray wisps of mist. It was a long time coming, and when finally Charlie faced it, he pulled his coat tighter around him and said, "The door was white. Something went wrong."

The man blended into the gray so nicely that Charlie was forced to stare to keep him in sight. "Ah, Charlie." Bo's smile was gentle. "You were so easy. The easiest one."

"Why isn't it white? I don't understand."

He'd never before heard Bo chuckle. "Such a joy to watch! A little winning and you were swaggering and strutting like a boy. A little boy's fantasies. So easy." He shook his head. "Illusion, Charlie. It was never intended for you to win in the end."

Charlie swallowed loudly. "Hunter lied."

"Of course he did. He and I are —partners." Charlie flinched. The old man had actually laughed aloud. "But you were the best, Charlie. The absolute best so far." Chill air soaked into Charlie's bones. "You entered with such — such enthusiasm!" The laugh rang again.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," Charlie said loudly. "This is wrong. I'm getting out of here."

He turned slowly to keep his balance, reaching behind him for the door. His fingers clutched air. He spun, equilibrium forgotten. The door should have been no more than a dozen paces behind him, but it was gone — only the same gray emptiness, sweeping eternally into nothing.

"Hey — I came *through* here — where — "

Behind him, Bo said, "Well, now that I've seen you safely here, I must leave you now. Enjoy your stay."

He was walking away. Charlie took a slow, dizzying step after him.

"Wait! Where's the damn door?



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Hunter — the building. Where'd they go?"

"Have fun, Charlie," Bo said over his shoulder. "In your free time, you might try looking for some little friends. There are others here. Brad Peters, Jay Locke — a few more. I'm afraid I don't know exactly where, though. It's such an awfully large place."

Another chuckle floated back through the mist. Bo was disappearing rapidly, blending into the gray. Setting his teeth, Charlie started after him.

"There has to be a door. There's always been a way out!"

"Always?" drifted back.

Bo seemed to move effortlessly across the wet gray sand. Charlie plowed through it, losing ground at every step. A chill wind had risen, biting into him. The silent landscape rolled away, unchanged. Charlie cupped his hands and shouted into the void, "There's a door — got to be! I'll find it! Damn you, Bo, I will!"

He was alone, but he plowed on, panting. The voice wafted back to him, bodiless, hollow in the mist.

"Welcome to *my* fantasy, wonder boy."



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*Traditionally ghosts are elusive, ephemeral. Here is a story of a land in which ghosts are hardly that; in fact, out of a population of several million, only two hundred thousand are alive...*

# Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Gonna Rise Again

BY
**RICHARD MUELLER**

I woke to the drumming of rain on the window, mistaking it for gunfire, and felt the plane losing altitude. The SEAT BELTS sign was lit and my watch said we were still hours from New York, but there was no panic in the cabin, so I relaxed. I was on my way in from Port Stanley with a retrospective wrap on the war — my action stories either in print or racing ahead of me on the wire —and I'd never heard of Port Pirie. Rotola was a name from an atlas, a name that had never — to my knowledge — appeared in a news story, and I was totally unfamiliar with it. (The Falklands was only my second overseas assignment.) When the Brazilian VASP airliner touched down at Lord Rodney Airport, seven hundred miles of black storm fronts pounding the water between the Antilles and the mainland, the captain announced that our flight would be delayed. Twelve hours at least. Of course, we were free to seek alternate transport, to cross-connect with a flight that might lead eventually to Miami or New Orleans, but I knew that scenario. It spelled pitching rides on L-1011s, Otters, even B-26 conversions, filling plastic bags with sour gruel, and listening to the wings work loose. They could have my share. In the past two months I'd ridden everything from helicopters to landing craft, and I figured that a few hours on terra firma couldn't seriously hurt my morale.

The terminal was a wooden frame building, rain-spattered and somewhat the worse for wear, the type of structure that Robyn would have called "quaint," a hybrid cross between a Howard Johnson's and a turnpike information center. The effect was broken, however, by a row



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of cleverly fashioned dolls, sitting on a roof beam below the eaves, and what appeared to be a pair of human thighbones saltired above the doorway. A legend carved into a wooden plaque read "Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Gonna Rise Again." I figured it strange, to say the least. Inside, a tall, ascetic quadroon in the uniform of a customs officer eyed my long hair suspiciously until I showed him my press pass.

"Ah, of course. From the war?"

When I admitted to this, he immediately brightened. "Excellent. A glorious thing, so many brave young men dying for their country."

"You might not think so if you were among the dying."

"Perhaps not."

As he stamped the visitor's box on my passport, I noticed a wall plaque by the doorway. It announced that Rotola had been a British and French codominion, discovered by the Spaniards, colonized by the Dutch, ceded to the Danes, captured by the French, and given shared status with the British after Ghent. Since then, things had been peaceful. Rotola had, with impressive ceremony, become the Republic of (Republique de) Rotola in 1967. It was bilingual, boasted 1,725 species of birds, and one volcano, which had never erupted.

"Would it be possible to find a barbershop, and a bar?"

"Oh, yes, sir. A fine English tap on LaFitte Road, just two blocks." He smiled and tugged absently on an earlobe. I saw that there was a tiny gold pin embedded in it.

"Oh, and over the doorway, those dolls?"

"Yessir. Child spirits. They like to watch the planes come and go."

"I see." I didn't, but asked, "And the bones? They're human, aren't they?"

"Yessir. Thighbones. From the leg, sir. They bring speed to the traveler."

I decided on the bar first.

The bar (or rather, pub) was a disappointment. It was dark, depressingly English, and unfriendly — at least to me. I had to pull the barman away from a conversation with a few of the locals, a fact of which he sullenly apprised me, and he replied to my question regarding a barber with, "Up 'igh Street." When I left, he called out, "Mind the ghosts, sir." "What ghosts?" I replied, but he was already deep in conversation with his cronies, probably laughing at me.

"Wm. Thibodeaux, Hair Stylist," read the rickety wooden sign. I checked. It was High Street. a typically British colonial affair of white shop facades and flagstone pavements. Several of the shopkeepers were setting up long tables, evidently for some sort of sidewalk sale. Before the shop of Thibodeaux, a barber pole revolved in a rain-spotted, curved glass sheath, giving off a soft squeak with each


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revolution, its red stripes painted with French slogans. Between its speed and my abysmal command of French, I was able to decipher none of it. I went in.

A thin mulatto, presumably Thibodeaux, was sitting in the only chair, reading a battered copy of *The Shining*. As I entered, he jumped up and ushered me wordlessly to his throne, smiling, proffering sheet and hand whisk. "I've been in the field," I began, intending to ask for a trim, but he put a finger to his lips. Then, placing a palm to my forehead, he appeared to listen. I began to wonder if I appeared feverish.

"Not to worry, sir," he said, spinning me around to face the mirrors. "Willie Thibodeaux knows just what you want." His scissors began to fly across my head, giving me exactly what I had been on the point of asking for, a layered trim. Robyn would have appreciated him. The day I left Ascension, she had remarked on my hair. "You're getting shaggy. Let's take you down to one of those supercut places and get you a clip." "Thanks. I could do a better job with a lawn mower." "Don't you like the unisex look?" I grinned. Robyn is short, slim, blonde: what the English would call a "proper stunner."

"What do you think? C'mere."

Willie Thibodeaux broke my reverie by thrusting an ivory-handled mirror into my hand. The haircut was as near perfect as I could imagine.

"Terrific. What do I owe you?"

"Two hundred francs or one pound or two and a half dollars American." He snatched up a skull with a shaving brush sticking out of it. "You wish a shave?"

I almost went out of the chair. "No. Is that thing real?" He shrugged and returned it reverently to its place on the shelf.

"Of course. It is my partner, Waters. He watches over the shop." He touched his whisk gently to the cranial bowl, three times, as if a ritual, then smiled, revealing golden teeth. He also wore a gold stud in one ear. It was shaped like a skull.

The restaurant was quiet, the food French and good, and I was certain that the bones in the jungle motif were, here at least, plastic. I was beginning to have serious doubts about a culture that was so death-oriented, and, when I emerged two hours later, blinking in the light, I was ready to return to the airport.

"Mr. McNary?"

Standing in the shade of the restaurant's awning was a tall, pale woman in a white tropical suit. She held a fly whisk, which she waved absently in the humid air, and behind her thick glasses showed that somewhat gaunt, middle-aged attractiveness I'd always associated with Scotland or Ireland.

"You are David McNary, Independent News Service?"



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"Yes, I am." She was appraising me with a look somewhere between a casting director's and a recruiting sergeant's. At length, she nodded.

"You are young, strong, and, one might assume, professionally unbiased. Yes, I think you'll do."

"For what?" I bristled, feeling my jaw tighten. I have a short fuse when it comes to being patronized, but she smiled reassuringly.

"My name is Anna-Leigh Calderon. I would like to interest you in a story, Mr. McNary, and a possible job."

"Unfortunately, my plane is leaving in a few hours, and I'm anxious to get back to New York, file my stories, and resume a quasi-normal life."

She broke into a deep, musical laugh. "If you had wished any form of normality, you would not have become a reporter. The story of which I am speaking is also not normal." I knew the next line, how it would be a sure Pulitzer and/or the greatest story of the year/decade/ century, but she threw me.

"It is so ... abnormal ... that you may not even be able to print it, but I think you will find it fascinating. With that thought in mind, I have taken the liberty of canceling your flight."

"What? You had no right...."

"Whether I did or did not have the right is of no consequence, because I have done so. However, if, after you have heard my proposal, you still wish to go on, I will restore your ticket and get you out on the first available flight. Now, are you willing to listen?"

Her driver, a short, swarthy Indian named Naik, had already collected my bags. The Bentley was comfortable, the road good, and I had to admit that I was interested. Any society that left bones and their attendant spirits lying around in such numbers had to have a lot of stories worth telling. The route was lined with rain-wet jungle, tropical birds in great profusion (1,725), and broken at intervals with shrines. Most of them contained a skull, thigh- or arm bone, and the occasional rib cage; but one, a pelvis decked out in fresh flowers and feathers and mounted on a white pole, was particularly impressive. However, when I asked my hostess about it, she merely smiled and replied, "All part of the story."

Her veranda overlooked the north shore, where we could watch the hurricane's outer storms torturing the horizon. Behind us rose the great, dormant volcano. After we had settled in and a houseboy had served us gin slings, she walked to the rail and looked out over the sea, pounding on the rocks five hundred feet downslope. The house was extremely elegant and filled with trophies, leather-bound volumes, and fine furniture, obviously gathered from around the world. It was beyond my ability to estimate the value, and sitting there, in my rumpled suit and stubble beard, I



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felt distinctly out of place.

"This is your first visit to Rotola." It was not a question. "I'll assume that you know little about our republic, as even *National Geographic* has barely scratched the surface."

"Just a plaque at the airport and an admonition to watch out for the ghosts."

"Yes, the ghosts. Rotola has a population of several million, though only two hundred thousand of them are alive. No, I'm not crazy, and neither are the Rotolans. They believe in ghosts. So do most of the local Europeans. Ghosts are a serious matter here."

"Do you believe?"

She smiled and tapped her glass with a soft ringing sound. "To the islanders, my countrymen, I say yes. To you, I admit to ... keeping an open mind. I was born in England, Mr. McNary, where we have a lot of ghosts, and almost no one believes in them. My father was an agent for a large tea company, and we traveled extensively: India, Ceylon, the Indies, Africa, almost anyplace that tea could grow. By my sixteenth birthday I could speak six languages, and my father was the board member for Asian sales. We owned a large plantation in Malaya, a smaller one in Ceylon, and a failed one here, on Rotola. There were troubles then in Malaya: a Communist uprising, and plantations were being burned, planters murdered, pitched battles in the towns. It was a frightening, yet exciting life.

"Then one day, a contingent of British engineers was assigned to our plantation as a screen against rebel attacks: an officer and twenty men. It was fortuitous in a number of ways. Not only did I fall in love and marry the officer, but his men were there the night the rebels attacked in force, hundreds of them. The battle raged until the first light, and by morning, there were only four of us left alive. Unfortunately, my mother, my father, and my husband were not among them."

She paused, perhaps waiting for the obligatory "I'm sorry." I said nothing. At length, she smiled to herself. "I sold the Malayan land, kept the one in Ceylon as an investment, and moved here, where I've lived ever since."

"It is ... picturesque," I ventured, "but why...?"

"Coming to that, coming to that. I have lived a reasonably comfortable life here, but, several years back, Ceylon became the free nation of Sri Lanka, and during the transition, I lost the plantation."

"Nationalization?" I asked.

"No. Other reasons. I have been living on my savings, but that is almost gone." She paused, uncomfortable with the subject, but pressed on. "I wish to continue living on Rotola, in this style to which I have become accustomed."


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"And this has something to do with me?"

"Yes."

"I'm a reporter. As you said, I'm unbiased, but I don't see what I can do...."

She waved her hand, a gesture that encompassed the entire island. As if in answer, lightning played across the distant clouds, and I felt the first chill of evening. "Rotola is an aberration in the modern world, more than an anachronism. It is a society totally bound up in death. When I told you that there was a population of several millions, I was not being facetious. The Rotolans believe that the dead live here among us. The dead watch over the living and, if placated, serve and protect them. And, like the living, they can become very petulant if ignored or taken for granted."

"All right. I've seen the bones and the spirit dolls." I said. "And the gold earrings and the shrines. Every people has its superstitions and traditions. But this is 1982. You don't seriously mean that these people actively believe in ghosts, do you?"

"If you mean the sort of flapping-sheet cartoon ghosts, no, I don't think so. But there is a definite feeling of oneness with the spirits of the ancestors here. Most people believe in ghosts, and many claim to see them. People are seldom buried here, Mr. McNary. Interred, yes; but if a man has kin living here on Rotola, they will not only visit the deceased, but they will arrange for the deceased to visit his former home. They call it the bone-walk. And shrines are set up along the roads, like the ones you saw today. A pelvis, for instance, for a girl who died in childbirth. And some spirits are kept on as household gods, or guardians."

"Yes, I believe I saw something like that today. Do people who claim to see these ghosts ... have they described them?"

"Oh, yes. There are varying degrees of sensitivity. The least aware, but still able to see, will detect them as a 'wrongness' in the air."

"Wrongness?"

"Mr. McNary. A trick of refraction, a reversal of shadow, an impossibly seen angle...."

"Sounds Lovecraftian."

She smiled. "If you've read H. P. Lovecraft, you're well on your way to understanding the ghost phenomenon of Rotola. The next degree of sensitivity detects a shimmering, like air over hot pavement. Then people advance to being able to see fleeting columns of smoky white, like dust devils. The most psychically adept are actually able to see the faces of their loved ones in great detail."

The idea sounded frightening. "Isn't it rather confusing, seven million ghosts loose at once? How do people who are able to see them keep from being driven mad?"


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She shook her head and raised a hand for the houseboy to fetch fresh drinks. "Generally, one is able to see only the ghosts of loved ones, of those who were connected closely in life with the observer. Often, this will not be more than half a dozen or so, and it's relatively easy to keep them straight."

"Generally? There are exceptions?"

She took off her glasses and pushed back her hair. At that moment she looked extremely uncomfortable, and I again felt that chill that signaled evening's coming. The storm was moving off, and I felt that soon my plane must be getting ready to resume its flight. I should be on it, I thought. On it and away from this island. Below the balcony, blue-green jungle stretched darkly down to the sea, waving and wickering in the wind, and I could visualize hordes of spirits drifting to and fro among the vegetation. There was, to my best recollection, no one that I had ever known who had died on Rotola, but if there were, would I see them? And how? As a "wrongness"? A "face"?

Anna-Leigh Calderon was staring over the edge of her glass, eyes fixed on the horizon.

"Generally?"

"Yes," she said, her poise returning. "On one night each year, all of the ghosts are visible, at least to those able to see them. Recorders, cameras, the psychically dense are not able to detect them, and even nonlocal mediums who have not spent some time here will usually see nothing. Again, there are exceptions. The islanders call that night, predictably, Ghost Night — or the Feast of the Spirits, if you have a Christian bias — and a great cycle of celebration precedes the appearance. The people set up long tables covered with food and drink and dance in the streets. This pleases the ghosts —who are, by and large, a jovial lot —and heavy drinking tends to dull the psychic sense and make the evening less confusing, easier to deal with. Less crowded."

Something was nagging at my mind, something I had seen. Merchants setting out tables. A sidewalk sale? I sat bolt upright.

"When is this festival?"

"On the summer solstice, the shortest night of the year," she answered quietly. "Tomorrow night."

I had just returned from a war zone; had been shot at; had seen men burn, drown, blown apart — but it had not seemed real. There was no fear in it for me. Now, on an island preparing a dinner dance in honor of seven million ghosts, I suddenly felt overwhelmed by the idea and terrified by its implications. Like the cowardly lion, I did believe in spooks —now — and it was all I could do to stay seated. It was all I could do to keep from running to the airport. She sensed my fear and played on it.

"I would not expect a man such as



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yourself to be afraid of the noncorporeal. That is why I chose you," she crooned soothingly. "Besides, though you may see our people acting strangely, the likelihood that you yourself will see a ghost is ... slight. And we will not be in Port Pirie, where the celebration is to be centered. We will be in the hills."

"The hills? I think you'd better explain."

South and east from the Calderon plantation, the roads rapidly become gravel, the dirt corduroy. We had exchanged the Bentley for a Land-Rover and had been climbing toward the volcano, Naik at the wheel, Anna-Leigh Calderon and I in the back. We had a twelve-kilometer drive before we were scheduled to rendezvous with the other half of our party, three judges.

The issue was bauxite. When Anna-Leigh Calderon had come to Rotola in the fifties, she had known that the tea plantation was not operating, but she had not known why. The attempts to get a tea crop from the rich Rotolan soil had simply not paid off. Angrily, she had begun a campaign to determine why and to alleviate the situation. Crop and soil experts had been flown in, tests taken, samples analyzed and cataloged — all to no avail. Tea would just not take in the Rotolan soil. Sadly, the experts admitted defeat and had returned home. Anna-Leigh Calderon was despondent. For a time she carried on experiments of her own, but the land would not cooperate. She finally gave up. No other crop was profitable enough to farm, so she settled back to live on her savings.

Then, two years ago, a young mining engineer on holiday from England had found a previously undiscovered vein of bauxite on the land. He informed Mrs. Calderon, who promptly bought his silence, then began making discreet inquiries of her own. How much would it cost to set up and run a mining operation? How much to ship? A short railroad would have to be built, and a ship-loading facility. Permits, payoffs, land access variances and environmental impact disclosures; she had done all the preliminary work when she ran square up against a seemingly insurmountable problem: the ghosts. The entire island was a vast ossuary, and, while agriculture had generally flourished, there had been no manufacturing or mining, due to the belief that this would upset the island's growing spiritual populace. Even throughout the Second World War, the Allies had respected the beliefs of the islanders and had refrained from introducing heavy installations.

In the course of her investigations, Anna-Leigh Calderon had talked to churchmen, civil lights, leaders of the Spiritual Society, military and police officials. She had spent money


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where it would do the most good, traded favors, resorted to blackmail when she had to, until she ran up against her highest and final obstacle: the Rotolan Ancestral Protection Council; three men, also known as the "judges." She had reasoned, they had refused. She had pleaded, they had weakened. She had offered, they had caucused. Finally, they put forth a counterproposal: the question would be put to the spirits of the dead on Ghost Day, before herself, the three judges, and an impartial witness. If the ghosts agreed, they would acquiesce. If the ghosts refused, their judgment must be accepted. She was forced to agree to the terms.

"So, I'm just to be a witness? That's all? I don't do anything?" I was thoroughly confused.

"You do plenty, Mr. McNary. You were picked, not by myself, but by the judges. Later, I met and approved you."

"Wait a minute. You say that they picked me *before* I met you? How?"

She smiled that damned enigmatic smile again. "Admittedly, we were forced to restrict ourselves to the passengers on your airplane, but you were an ideal choice. Elijah had good judgment."

Before I could frame a question, the Land-Rover lurched through a gap in the surrounding cover into a canebrake. Naik called out, "We're here, Miss."

There were two vehicles and a table set up in the clearing, which was the last stretch of relatively level ground before the volcano's main slope. The table was piled high with foodstuffs of all sorts, silver and glassware, and what appeared to be a real linen tablecloth. Behind it stood three men. With a start, I recognized them.

"Yes, Mr. McNary. The judges."

When I dismounted, Willie Thibodeaux shook my hand. "Ah, Mr. McNary. It is good to see that you have chosen to join us, of your own free will. May I present Richard Preston of the Royal Oak Inn and Elijah Sanders of the Custom House?" The bartender and the customs agent nodded gravely in my direction.

"I've been set up," was all I could reply.

"Yes, Mr. McNary, but in the gentlest of ways. Mr. Thibodeaux, Mr. Preston, and Mr. Sanders are the Rotolan Ancestral Protection Council. You are about to witness a rare event. There has not been a spirit judging on Rotola since 1955."

"But I still don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Willie Thibodeaux sat down on the Land-Rover's steps and gestured expansively. "All this is spirit land. Miss Calderon wishes to mine the box-hite from here. From here to her house is where the English mining engineer says that the rich vein lies. But this is spirit land. Spirit land must not be mined."



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"That is for the spirits to decide," Anna-Leigh Calderon said hotly. Preston nodded in agreement. I was stunned. From here to her house. It must be the richest find of bauxite in history.

" 'At's right, Mr. McNary. 'At's for the spirits ta say, *an' they'll say through you.*"

That cold feeling was back, as if I'd stepped off the edge of an ice floe into the Arctic sea. "Through me?"

"A form of possession, Mr. McNary. A mild form, but it is necessary to have an unbiased outsider."

"And if I don't wish to be your psychic guinea pig?" I began, then froze. Naik was cradling an Enfield jungle carbine loosely in his arms.

"We've gone to far too much trouble to stop now, Mr. McNary."

Night fell with the suddenness of a thunderstorm. Anna-Leigh Calderon, Thibodeaux, and I were standing in a loose triangle in the center of the clearing. Preston and Sanders sat at either end of the banquet table. Naik sat cross-legged atop the Land-Rover, the rifle across his knees, watching me.

I had been prepared ceremonially. I was bare to the waist and wore a headdress of feathers. My hands rested on the hilt of a four-foot wooden sword, edged in razor-sharp coral and shark's teeth. It was a fearsome weapon, but no match against a .303 bullet.

Anna-Leigh Calderon was soaked with sweat, her hair hanging loosely around her glasses, her blouse wet. She looked at me in mock sympathy.

"Do not be so reluctant to judge. If I am willing to accept your judgment and Willie is...." Thibodeaux was standing silently, eyes closed.

"You run, by far, the smallest risk."

"I will judge nothing under coercion."

"You will have no choice."

"I'll bring legal action against the lot of you," I blurted angrily.

"You have no witnesses." This was true. I was helpless. I was remembering a rotten joke about enjoying rape, when I felt the touch of something tentative and cold. I whirled around rapidly, but there was nothing there. It was as if I had been touched from inside.

"Be quiet," Thibodeaux said softly. "They come."

The touch came again, then I receded. I do not know of any other way to describe it, but I seemed to draw, be drawn, up and away from the world. To detach and climb up into my own head, as another force entered me. I was sitting in a vast, cold dome, looking out through the windows of my eyes — and what I saw, what I saw. If I *did* see it. Light seemed to flow into the clearing, coating and surrounding everything, the table, the vehicles, the people. It flowed into me, as water through the orifices of a flooding building, swirling and rising toward the place where



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I sat, behind my eyes, paralyzed, clinging to the hope that the assurances that I had been given were true. That this condition was temporary. That I would be able to climb down.

After a time, I found myself walled off, though alive, blocked off by the light. I could see, but not act. I was aware that my body was balanced, breathing, shifting slightly of its own accord, no longer under my control. Then the judgment began.

It was not a judging of sound, but, by the play of the ghostly lights, I could tell from the outset that Anna-Leigh Calderon's case was lost. They swirled and flowed in patterns — whites, blues, yellows, colors I couldn't name — that seemed to convey meanings without words, without even the use of separate concepts. There was sadness, disturbance, disapproval, anger. The mining would destroy the flow of the ancient land. Its patterns would be broken. Yellow judgments and stern white-flows spoke the condemnation of the ages on Anna-Leigh Calderon's plan. There was no reply. No spirits spoke for the mine.

Suddenly, I saw what was coming and began to pound frantically on the inside of my skull, trying desperately to get out. The glowing spirits crooned reassuringly to me, locking me tighter than ever into the judgment. And the judgment was final. Somewhere I felt the sound of a gunshot, but the spirit wind was too powerful, and the gunshot meant nothing. My body turned as my arms came up, and through the swirling light I could see her; her body locked into immobility, her eyes dull with terror. She had known what she faced, and still she risked it. I felt my arms coming down.

I put the headphones on a Muzak channel and settled back to reflect. It was a story I could never write, never even admit to. I was technically guilty of murder, or innocent by reason of insanity. The choice was open to interpretation. Neither Naik nor Thibodeaux would admit to any knowledge of anything. "Miss Calderon left with Mr. Preston and Mr. Sanders," they repeated. "She thanks you and regrets that she will not be able to accompany you to the airport." Later I found an envelope in my suitcoat pocket containing twenty-five hundred dollars. No note.

Puerto Rico is in the window below me. In a few hours I will be back in New York, with Robyn, among the familiar ghosts of the city. Perhaps there, I will heal, and leave the ghosts of Rotola to themselves.

I never asked Anna-Leigh Calderon whether ghosts travel, whether they ever leave Rotola. It seems unlikely, but I sit here, under my headphones, waiting, watching for ... a wrongness.

*For JaNelle and Dan*



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*Brad Strickland wrote "The Herders of Grimm," (April 1984). His new story concerns a band of hunters fighting for survival, the remnants of a colony for which Earth is only a distant memory.*

# The Taker of Children

BY
**BRAD STRICKLAND**

On the pale, haze-filtered light of the stars and moons flitted a shadow. It traveled hugging the ground, darting through knee-high sedgestalks without swish or rustle, crossing stony clearings without rattle or scrape, running into the wind.

Behind blundered Sticks-for-Legs, noisy as always. The shadow paused at the crest of a low ridge, turned, and beneath the silhouetted black mop of hair, the stars reflected pinpricks in two eyes. When Sticks had panted near enough to hear, the shadow hissed in a tone just below a whisper, "Far enough. Wait here. The rest must be silent."

Sticks nodded, wheezing, gulping air. "Right, Cat. I'll be here. Don't let anything happen to Short-Hands."

Runs-like-a-Cat jerked his chin downward in a nod, then slipped over the ridge. The wind chilled the sweat on his chest. He stood at the edge of a wide, bowl-shaped plain, its floor undulating, like a sea shot with glassy rollers frozen suddenly. The acrid odor of sage grass came to him mingled with the sweet-feculent smell of the boffs, of their dung. The herd was not large; probably not as many beasts as the fingers on both Cat's hands. The cows would be clustered together for warmth and safety, the bull and a bullock or two posted as sentries.

Cat scanned the plain from the corners of his eyes, using his night vision to pick out dark, blotchy shapes against the lighter grass, shapes that were boulders and bristle-leaf shrubs. And then something darker, larger, moving: the bull.

Cat sank to his haunches and considered. Short-Hands would try for the largest animal he could hope to


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bring down alone. Would he be foolish enough to try to cast his spear at the bull, a creature that stood higher at the shoulder than the top of a tall man's head? Briefly, Cat weighed Short-Hands's pain and need against his courage and judgment. Then, with infinite care, Cat began to creep toward the bull.

He was not fifty body-lengths away when he saw the movement. A white shape erupted from the grass close by the bull's left flank, arm already cocked, already throwing. Cat cried aloud, and the bull's outraged bellow might have burst from his own lungs. He was on his feet, running, as the animal leaped, whirled, and charged Short-Hands. Cat saw the flash of moonslight on the boy's ludicrously small bone knife, the toss of the deadly horns, the headlong tumble of Short-Hands — hit or feinting? — to one side.

The bull heard Cat's approach and turned, confused, to face this new enemy. Without slackening pace, Runs like-a-Cat scooped a handful of loose pebbles and clods and pelted them at the beast. Then, his head thrown back, he ululated in an uncanny mockery of the herd's danger cry. The sound was taken up back in the east, back in the dark, as the startled cows bestirred themselves. The bull shook his head, *whuffed* at Cat, and danced for a moment, indecisive. Then the thudding of retreating hooves, the bawling of the female boffs, helped him make up his negligible mind. The brute turned and lumbered off at a heavy trot, the shaft of Short-Hands's spear bobbing. The cast had been badly aimed; the point would work itself loose from its shallow lodgment in the sinewy flesh of the flank before the boff had rejoined his harem.

"Short-Hands!" Cat cried urgently. "Here."

Cat scrambled to him. The other boy was working himself loose from the thorned embrace of a bristle-leaf, his hands with their curiously long, flat palms and their baby-sized fingers busy with hair and loin-wrap and skin. "Let me help," said Cat, reaching.

Short-Hands held up a bone blade. "I will not go back except as leader, Cat."

"No. Not you. You don't have the patience, you're too eager. The leader has to think of the children first, make sure they survive — "

"I could not kill my boff. I cannot join the grown-ups. I will not follow you, younger than I. My knife is for you, Runs-like-a-Cat. While both of us live, the leader cannot be sure of life."

Cat stood sullenly. "I saved you."

"Better to let me die. Get away! I give you this night. When we meet again, under sun or moons, one shall die. Go!"

Cat walked a short distance away on stiff legs. Then he turned. "Short-Hands, it's dangerous alone, away from camp. What if the Taker of Children comes?"



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"Let him take me! Then you needn't worry about finding my blade in your throat!"

"I do not want this fight."

"I did not want your help."

Defeated, Cat turned again and ran with the wind. He found Sticks-for-Legs huddled at the foot of the first rise, where he had left him. Sticks jerked suddenly at Cat's approach. "Short-Hands?"

"Alive," Cat said. He shivered; the night was growing chill. "Come, Sticks. Now the night holds one more enemy."

Autumn was coming to the plains, and after autumn would follow the long, bitter winter, when food was mainly such as could be stolen from the adults' camp, or wheedled from the girls who had safe passage between the boys' lair and the grown-ups'. Hunting turned bad in the winter — one could count on killing a rab or two, perhaps, or even one of the elusive feral cats, but they made hardly a mouthful for one person. Life in winter was always harsh for the children. This year Cat was especially worried about Sticks: he had not gained flesh during the summer, and the grotesque thinness of his limbs was more pronounced than ever. Sticks was exhausted when they returned to camp after tracking Short-Hands, and the next day he lay in the lean-to and slept like one stunned.

Cat brooded. With Short-Hands gone, only the two males remained, and four small girls, and the two girls old enough to be taboo and to move freely between the adults' world and the children's. The band was smaller than it had been in his memory, far smaller than that cold day when his mother had pushed him toward the two waiting girls who brought him away from the fire and to his new, savage life. Those girls had become women in the two years since then, one of them dead in childbirth, the child luckily dead, too — a contorted, many-limbed monster the adults had cast contemptuously away, to be found and buried by Short-Hands and Cat. The other girl, woman now, still lived — barren, ill, and wretched, but a member of the adult band nonetheless.

Others were gone, too, the males killed by boffs — or, having killed their prey, they had become members of the tribe. The females had, one by one, reached the age of mating and had been claimed by the men. The rest had died, or sometimes simply vanished, no one knew where — no one except perhaps the Taker of Children.

Someone came quietly beside Cat. He looked up; one of the elder girls, Hair-like-a-Cloud. Cat moved over — he sat on the smooth, looping root of an ashleaf plant — and Cloud settled beside him. "Sticks is very ill, I think. He is hot to touch," she murmured.



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"He needs a healer."

"One is coming. A man brought salt to sell from the north, and he told the people that a healer had come into the last village the day before he left."

"A grown-up healer."

Cloud looked sharply at him. "But a woman. She might help a child."

Cat reached to pluck a stem of ashleaf. The plant, like a tree with enormous roots but a trunk less tall than a two-years' child, had an abundance of leaves on slim, vertical stems shooting directly from the twists in the roots. The plant sucked the life of the leaves back into itself now, storing food for the cold months ahead, and the leaves flaked white and puffed away with the slightest touch. "Cloud," Cat said, keeping his voice low, "do you really believe in the Taker of Children?"

Cloud drew up her knees and hugged them. Her white hair framed a thoughtful face, already losing the plumpness of childhood, and her light blue, nearly transparent eyes grew pensive. "I don't know. So much you hear is talk,' legend. But something takes the children. So few of us live to be big." She looked down the hillside. A shallow stream wound at its base, and farther upstream distant traces of blue cookfire smoke marked the hut-city of the adults. "There are fewer of them every year, too."

"Babies? There are some babies in camp."

Cloud shook her head. "Fewer babies, too, I think, but I meant fewer of the grown folk. They die easily. More huts are empty than lived in now. I remember it differently."

Cat screwed up his face. It was brown and angular, not the face of a four-year-old — or a twelve-year-old, in the nearly forgotten terms of Earth — but it was older in care, wiser in pain. "I can't remember the people of the camp. I remember my mother pushing me away. That is all." He sighed. "Short-Hands has gone to the wild. He will kill me if he can."

"I'm sorry."

Cat shrugged. "His heart is too old for his body. He wants to be a grown man. He failed to kill his boff. Now he's alone out there. If he tries to spear me, I'll have to fight him. But he's all alone — and the Taker of Children, if there is such a thing — "

"Hush," Cloud said, and Cat realized then that she was afraid.

He worked up a smile for her. "Don't worry. You're almost a big one now. A few more months, and the taker won't even look at you."

Cloud blushed and pulled her tunic away from her chest. She was self-conscious about her developing body. "*You* won't have to worry, anyway, Runs-like-a-Cat," she said. "Even the Taker wouldn't have you in his deep black bag. You're too much of a nuisance!"

Cat chuckled. Behind, in the lean-to outside the cave, Sticks tossed in



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uneasy sleep and groaned. Cat and Cloud exchanged a look; then Cat turned speculative eyes to the north. "Cloud," he said softly, "how many days is it to the next village?"

She touched his arm. "Too many for you to walk alone, Cat."

"The big ones might take the little girls back into camp — "

"Only if they knew there were no boys to guard them. It's too far, Cat. Even if you could walk it — Sticks would die."

Cat puffed out his breath. "Moons and sun!" he whispered. "I hope she comes quick!"

The healer came on the fourth day after that, riding a gelded and tamed boff, not a big one. Cat, perched on a lookout cliff across the abbel orchard from the adults' camp, looked on in wonder. He had never seen a boff made to serve people before, and at first the brown and placid beast attracted him more than the healer did. But then he turned his eyes to her: a plain woman, tall and lean, her brown hair hacked indifferently short, she hefted two large packs from the boff's back and stooped to enter the headman's hut. Cat knew she would stay in camp for the duration of her visit, two or three days anyway. He could not reach her in that time. His hope lay in what came later, when she would mount her beast and ride away, going — where? South, to another village? If any lay there, Cat had never heard of them. Back north, then, back to wherever she had come from.

Whatever the direction, Cat would have to be ready. He planned to follow her, to catch her alone when she camped, and then, somehow — he didn't know how yet — to persuade the healer to treat Sticks, to find a cure for his thin legs, to capture some life in the cage of his ribs.

Well, that would come as it came. Cat pushed back from the cliff edge and the heady scent of ripening abbels, stooped low as he retreated, and made his way back to the cave and the lean-to. He did not forget Short-Hands — part of his mind, it seemed to him, could never again forget him — but he saw no sign of his foe.

A thin blue stream of smoke curled and eddied in the cool breeze of morning. Cloud and the other older girl, One-Green-Eye, had stolen some odds and ends of meat from the adults' camp and were stewing them in a fire-backed earthenware pot, as they had seen the wives do. Sticks-for-Legs sat close by the fire, feeding it twigs and stems, coughing when the smoke billowed the wrong way. The four little girls scraped at a boff hide — or pretended to; their squeals and giggles told Cat they played more than they worked.

He came to sit beside Sticks. "Better today?"

Sticks nodded, looking into the



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fire. "I feel stronger. I shouldn't have run so hard. Don't worry about me."

Cat ruffled the younger boy's fair hair. "Ah, you think I care about you. I'm thinking of the children, that's all. In the winter the two of us will have to hunt our meat — rabs and tree-jumps, not boffs. You'll have to be strong enough for that, at least. So get well quickly, will you?"

Sticks looked sideways at Cat. His light hair was blackened with streaks of soot, and smoke smeared his face. The trails of tears stood out against the black startlingly, like cracks in his cheeks. "I dreamed about the Taker," Sticks mumbled.

"Dreams, dreams," Cat snorted. "Dream up a boff, and throw your spear at it. The spear goes through the dream."

Sticks squirmed but said nothing.

With a grunt of impatience. Hair-like-a-Cloud spattered Cat's shoulder with a few drops of hot water. "You chatter like a tree-jump! If we're to feed these babies before night, I need water!"

Cat leaped grinning to his feet. "You see, Sticks? I know your game — this is how you keep the women from ordering you around!"

Sticks gave a weak smile to acknowledge the feeble joke. Cat slung a waterskin over his shoulder. "You'll have water, and abbels for dessert," he crowed. "I won't be long!"

"Don't get caught," One-Green-Eye warned him, the blank half of her face looking baleful.

"I won't."

Cat filled the waterskin first, down in the stream; he left it there, sunk in the cool water, while he made his way back toward the adult camp. Abbels were good this time of year, crisp and sweet and red, and the adults protected them jealously. It was Cat's pride to steal a few whenever he could, just to show off.

"Abbels," he breathed to himself, liking the funny sound of the word. "Abbels, Abbels, Abbels. Abbelsabbels-abbels — " he chuckled subvocally. Abbels. His mother had told him something about abbels, long ago. What was it? Oh, yes, "Abbels come from Earth, child. Many, many years ago — oh, many more than you could think — the people came from Earth; and abbels, and cats, and boffs, and rabs, and — " He had lost the litany. Many of the things he knew, though. Of course, many other things had *not* come from Earth: bristle-leaf, ashleaf, popper-plants, moons-catchers, tree-jumps, many other things. But his people and abbels had come from Earth, and sometimes Cat wondered what Earth was, and where.

He had no time for wondering then. The adult camp lay ahead; he could see one lone sentry, leaning on his spear, close by the stream. Usually the approaches to the orchard were well guarded until the villagers had stripped the trees of fruit, but with a healer in the village, the watch was lighter. Cat had expected that. So



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many of the big people had something wrong with them, open sores, mysterious aches, dimness of sight or hearing; and healers came seldom.

Cat crouched to study the best means of approach. Here the valley was narrow, with little substantial cover aside from a few puffbushes. He could backtrack and climb the bluff, as he had done to spy on the camp, but there was no easy way down into the orchard from there, and if he tried to clamber down the cliff face, he would quickly be spotted. The stream was too shallow for underwater swimming. Cat's only hope was to take advantage of the single guard, to watch for an opportunity. He settled to wait.

He was as patient as a real cat. An hour crawled by. The sentry swatted face-buzzers, stamped his feet, looked over his shoulder now and again, obviously yearning for a replacement. Then, finally, he began shifting his weight from side to side, and Cat grinned to himself. Before long the guard stuck his spear point-down in the sand and disappeared a few steps away behind a puffbush. Cat was already moving. He skirted the edge of the river, paused near the spear — should he leave some token? — finally reversed it, turning it point-up, butt jammed into the sand. Then he had slipped on, had found cover, and was making his way to the orchard before the guard had even rearranged his loin-wrap.

If the sentry noticed the spear after he returned, Cat would have only a minute or so to steal the fruit. But as he reached the first trees, he heard no outcry behind him; the thick-wit must have forgotten which way he had thrust the weapon into the sand.

Cat swung into a good tree and reached for the reddest fruit. In seconds he had filled the small bag tied at his waist. He paused in the tree, listening, inhaling the ripe, lush air. No sign of pursuit.

Smiling happily, Cat loped back toward the river. It would be an easy matter to come up silent behind the guard, snatch away his spear, and run laughing away. Then the dull-head would know that Cat had come, had stolen, had escaped unpunished once more —

Cat stopped, caught his breath. Ahead, in the sandy clearing beside the river, the guard lay on his back, the spear thrust through his breast. Cat felt cold; he was aware of the grainy soil beneath his bare feet, the purring complaint of the river to his right, the reek of woodsmoke sharp in the air. And then the body stirred feebly.

Now Cat saw that the spear thrust was only a trick of perspective. The spearhead was sunk deep in the ground close under the man's left armpit, and the man himself was merely unconscious, a token, as the reversed spear had been a token: but this one had been left by Short-Hands, and meant for Cat.



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The guard groaned and moved again, and Cat leaped light-footedly away, running downstream; but he smiled no longer, and every few steps, he looked behind him.

Sticks was able to walk again after a day, but still he looked pinched with pain. Cloud had been to the adult camp, had seen the healer from a distance, had listened unobtrusively to some of her talk to the adults; but she had found no opportunity of speaking privately to the woman.

"What is she like?" Sticks asked, as he and Cloud sat close to the campfire in the gathering darkness of evening. Already three moons rode the sky: two low in the west, so small that their crescents were barely discernible, one at zenith, larger than the others, looking like a white abbel half-eaten.

Cloud shrugged at the question. "What is the healer like? Like all of them. She treats those who have hurt themselves, gives medicine to those who are ill. She helps to ease the pain for those who are going to die."

Cat looked sidelong at Cloud. He sat a little apart from the other two, and he grunted softly. He did not like to mention dying around Sticks.

But the younger boy appeared not to have noticed. He asked in a faraway tone, "Did she say where she came from?"

"Not in my hearing. I can guess, though. From Citadel."

Cat snorted a laugh. "From Citadel, from Citadel," he mocked. "Where men and women walk tall and straight and are never sick, and no one has to hunt to live, and milk runs in rivers through the streets, and abbels drop ripe off the tree into your mouth!"

Sticks did not change his dreamy voice: "I believe in Citadel."

"You believe people came down from the sky," Cat said. "You believe everything the old women jabber about. Citadel is a dream, a nothing."

"It's better than this," Sticks said simply.

"How would you know?" Cat challenged. "When have you ever known anything besides this — besides shivering through winter and hunting food all summer? Besides ducking every grown-up you see because they'd as soon put a spear through your belly as look at you? When?"

Sticks lay back, clasped his hands behind his head, and said to the sky, "I see things in my head, at night. I dream."

Cloud stroked his fine, fair hair. "Keep dreaming, Sticks," she said in a low voice. "Be happy in your dreams."

"I can run then," Sticks murmured. "And my legs don't hurt so much. I can breathe, too. Only sometimes — sometimes in my dreams I see the Taker."

Cat spat a sizzling stream into the fire. Cloud said seriously, "Do you really? Tell me what he's like."



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"It's hard to say," Sticks said, his words drifting. "Sometimes I don't see him; he's just a sound in the trees. But sometimes he's a big man, bigger than a boff, only I never see his face. He's made of black clouds and lightning. And he has a bag slung at his side, and he walks through the world like an abbel-picker at harvest. And he reaches down for the children — "

"If he wakes up screaming tonight, *you're* going to calm him," Cat said.

"No," Sticks. "No, I'm not ... you don't understand. I'm not afraid of the Taker, not really. I just feel — small. As if I don't matter. As if I'm just another one ripe to be picked, no different from any of them...."

He slipped into sleep. Cloud sat with her hand on his hair, still stroking softly. "Poor child," she sighed. "To see your own death like that."

Cat looked at her. Moonslight cast a glowing aureole around her features, made her face ageless. He asked, "Is that what you think the Taker is, then? Just death?"

"For some. For most." Cloud breathed, and there was a catch in the sound. "Poor Sticks. What must it feel like, to believe your death will be meaningless?"

"What other kind of death is there?" Cat asked morosely. He expected no answer, and received none.

Two times Cat saw signs of Short-Hands. Once the older boy had lain on a hillside opposite the children's camp: Cat found his form outlined in crushed grass. The second time was near the river, when Cat had once more gone for water. A sound. not quite random, came faintly from his left, and he spun, spear in hand. "Come, Short-Hands!" he called; but no one answered. When Cat searched in the brush beside the path, he found the mark of Short-Hands' feet, impressed clearly in the earth. The other was telling Cat that a spear could have come whistling as easily as a sound, that Cat still was not careful enough.

Cat became more careful.

But for all Cat's vigilance, the healer left the adults' camp a whole half-day before he knew. Cat had employed One-Green-Eye and Hair-like-a-Cloud as spies, but on the day the healer left, One-Green-Eye had been caught up by a woman who wanted help in butchering a boff, and the girl could not tell Cat what had happened until well after noon. One-Green-Eye had marked the path the healer took shortly after daybreak: she and her beast had forded the stream and gone off toward the north.

Cat asked Cloud to prepare journey-food; then he found Sticks. "We're going," he said to the younger boy. "You'll see the healer soon."

"Is it far?"

"Not so far as it might be," Cat answered cheerfully. "Besides, when you get tired, you'll ride on my back."



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Cloud had filled a bag with strips of dried meat and a few hard-baked cakes. Cat tied the bag to his waist, filled a waterskin, thrust a knife into his loin-wrap, and hefted two spears. Sticks looked at these with sick apprehension. "You don't think — "

"Just in case, Sticks." Cat looked at Cloud. "Take care of things until I get back. Enough food?"

"For days. Be careful, Cat."

"Always," he grinned. He jerked his head at Sticks. "Let's go."

Sticks walked with determination, using his spear as a staff, and though Cat purposely kept the pace slow and was always ready to call a rest, Sticks never asked for one. By twilight, when they settled for a meal, Sticks was visibly worn. Cat reckoned they had made at least as good time as the laden beast of the healer; but she was still a half-day away from them.

After they had eaten, Cat stood. "Come on. Climb up. Time to ride."

"You're tired, too," Sticks said. "I can walk."

"Faster this way. Good moonslight, but it's not the easiest trail I've ever followed; and we'll lose some moons before the night is old. Come on; you'll save time."

Sticks, after a little more persuasion, did. Cat wonderingly felt the bony legs clasping him, the thin arms around his neck. He had not thought how lifeless those limbs would feel.

He moved slowly through the gathering dusk, but steadily, finding the boff's straight tramp not too difficult to follow. Before long they came to some evidences that the healer had stopped briefly, perhaps for a noon meal. Cat felt heartened and walked until two moons had set before faulting on the track. He let Sticks down for a brief rest while he cast about, hating to backtrack; and only a few body-lengths away he hit the trail again. But with only one of the two larger moons in the sky, such tracking was uncertain, and Cat called a halt for the night. He reckoned that nearly nine hours of darkness remained ahead of them, and then perhaps eleven of daylight, in this season when days and nights were almost equal. If Sticks held out, if the healer took a leisurely path, they might catch her tomorrow. If, if, if.

Sticks was talkative that night, his mind running on what he would do when well, on the hunts the two of them would share. Cat listened with a good nature, occasionally chaffing his friend lightly; but with half an ear he listened for night sounds, the sounds of stalkers. He heard nothing but the sigh of the wind, and once, very far away, the lonesome cry of a ptero, the birdlike four-winged scavenger that sailed high above the world day and night, coming down only to feed, to mate, and to bear young. At last Cat allowed himself to slide into sleep, long after Sticks had murmured himself into dreams.

They were up and moving before


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full sun the next morning. Sticks walked even more slowly now, and Cat, all impatience, insisted that he ride twice during the forenoon. By the time the sun declined in the west, they had crossed a good part of the rolling prairie and had passed the farthest point Cat had ever been on a hunt. Ahead stretched a jumbled countryside of dry washes, loose stone, and dark green, thick-leaved vegetation growing low against an orange-brown soil; but the trail led that way, and they followed. With the sun almost resting on the western horizon, Cat discovered a small heap of boff droppings, so fresh they must have been deposited within the hour. Sticks, lagging behind, met the news with only silence.

Cat glanced sharply at his friend. The younger boy wore the pinched, pained expression he had worn during his illness, and his legs tottered beneath him. "Are you all right, Sticks?" Cat asked.

"I don't think so," Sticks confessed with a weak smile. "It feels like the ground is moving. It isn't, is it, Cat?"

"The ground never moves," Cat said, worried.

"It does when I dream. The Taker of Children shakes it with his steps. It feels like that now."

Cat looked around. Two conical boulders close together provided some shelter from the wind. He took Sticks to them, made him eat, gave him the water skin. Sticks, understanding what he meant to do, gripped Cat's wrist with terrible strength. "Don't leave me! I'm afraid!"

"Nothing to be afraid of," Cat said cheerfully. "Here, I leave you a spear. You sit with your back against the stone there, and it'll keep you warm. I'll be back before the big moon shows. I'll bring the healer."

"Promise?"

"I promise. She's so near now I can smell her. You wait for us. Be just like you are when we hunt rabs, and I drive them to you. Be silent as stone, be patient. I'll be back before you know it."

"All right," said Sticks, but his voice was a ragged whisper.

Once away, Cat ran, leaping fleet-footedly over stonefalls and sandy barrens, his eyes sharp for a hoof mark, a broken leaf, as he followed the hot trail. He came around a low dune just at the last light of the sun, and almost ran into the arms of the healer.

Cat's breath caught. He had to look up at her: a strange sensation. She stared back, tight-lipped, her eyes gray, her face freckled in the light of the vanished sun. "So. You're what's been following me for two days. I hope you're happy now that you've found me. For what, I wonder?"

Her accent was strange, and Cat had trouble following her words. He panted, "Please, my friend. My friend needs a healer. He is very ill."

"Where is he?"


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"Back here, not far. Near some rocks. Come."

She made no move, except to look him up and down. "Not that fast. I know outsider customs, how you're cast away as soon as your mothers tire of feeding you, how you form bands and live as thieves until you prove yourself worthy of life, and capable of living it. I don't trust thieves, and I won't go with you. If you have a sick friend, bring him here, to me. Bring him alone."

Cat shook his head. "He's very sick. I'm afraid he may die."

Her eyes did not change. "Don't ask me for pity, boy. I have none left to give. I ran out years ago."

"Please — he's very young."

"Don't let him get too much older while you stand and talk. Bring him to me, and I'll look at him. Or go your way, it's all the same to me."

Quick anger heated Cat's veins. "You're like all the others! Grown-ups never care what happens to us!"

Her face was bleak as a desert rock. "Have you thought that some of us have cared too much? Too much to bear to see hopeless bodies twist and wither? That some of us are so hard pressed to live ourselves that we throw the children to chance, hoping they'll harden and become strong and live?" She shook her head. "Listen to me, boy. I'm a healer; you bring your friend to me, and I will try to help him. I'll rest here for one day — that should be time enough. If you're not here by sunset tomorrow, I'll leave. And don't try to come with your whole band. I can do things to you that you've never heard of. Come with your friend, if you really have one."

Cat struggled, but his chest heaved, and no words came.

"Go. Get back to your friend. I'll be here; come as slowly as you can." She turned and walked back to her tent, her boots crunching in the pebbly soil.

Cat retraced his steps, estimating time. He had not taken very long to reach her. If they set out at sunrise tomorrow, they should arrive in her camp long before noon, and even if Cat had to carry Sticks the whole way.

He was still pondering the problem when he came in sight of the boulders. The larger moon, nearly full, was just out, silvering the rocks. Cat ran up them silently, bent to look into the deepening gloom between them. "Sticks?"

No answer came, and Cat felt the heart sink within him. "Sticks? Are you awake?" He crept into the darkness, feeling ahead. Something cold, yielding, and clammy met his hand — the waterskin. Sticks was gone.

Cat backed out of the crevice, tightened his grip on his spear. He heard a sound, turned toward it, saw a flash of white, felt sudden pain in his left arm, cried out, and staggered — and even as he fell, he saw the



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shape of Short-Hands running toward him, bone knife in hand.

Cat hit hard, twisted, felt skin and muscle tear, and tried to roll, too late. Short-Hands was on him, left hand groping in his hair, trying to stretch back his neck, the right bringing the knife up to strike —

And then the grip was broken. Something, some — Sticks! — had hurled himself onto Short-Hands's back, and they rolled away, the older boy grunting, cursing.

Staggering to his feet, Cat pulled his way up the spear haft, groaning as the wood burned through the flesh of his arm just above the elbow; then he was free, the spear dropped away, and he had snatched up his own weapon. One-handed, he swung it like a club, caught Short-Hands on the neck, knocked him off the supine Sticks. Short-Hands scrabbled sideways, got to his feet, and Cat struck him again, sweeping his legs away. The other boy crashed hard to the ground, and before he could rise again, Cat's spearpoint pressed the skin of his throat.

"You filth," Cat panted. "The fight was ours, Short-Hands, not Sticks's. If you've hurt him — "

Sticks groaned.

"Kill me," Short-Hands said. "Kill me, and take him into the desert. You're taking him out to lose him, aren't you?"

"To a healer!"

Silence for a moment; then, suspiciously: "How could you find a healer who'd treat a child?"

"I found one," Cat said.

Short-Hands swallowed. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Short-Hands, we aren't finished, you and I. But I have to get Sticks to the healer. I give you life, for the second time — if you'll help me. Help me take Sticks to the healer, and we'll meet anytime you say, spear to spear, fair fight."

"Can I trust you?"

"Think where my spearpoint would be if you could not."

"Let me up, then. We have a truce, but only until Sticks is out of the way."

Cat dropped his spear. Now he felt the burning bite that had been taken from his arm, felt the hot drip of blood down his side and on his feet. "See if Sticks is all right," he said.

The night had grown darker, or Cat's eyes dimmer. He could barely see the pale form of Short-Hands. He heard the other boy move away a short distance. Suddenly weary, Cat sank to his haunches. A moment later Short-Hands was back. "He still breathes. But I can't wake him. I didn't hit him, Cat — "

"You didn't need to. He was already very weak. Will you carry him? I can't."

"I'll carry him. You lead the way."

Cat leaned on his spear as he walked. For a time he had the same


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crazy sensation that Sticks had described — that the ground rolled and heaved beneath him, that the solid foundation of his world quivered and rippled like water on a windy day. He felt cold, weak, but he kept grimly on his way. The newest crescent moon had set in the west by the time they came in sight of the healer's fire. Short-Hands, plodding behind, said, "I go no closer, Cat. Have her come here."

"If she will," Cat said wearily.

"You and I meet back at the rocks. Spear to spear. For the leadership."

"As soon as Sticks is taken care of. Tomorrow, the next day."

"I'll wait as long as it takes."

Later the healer told Cat that he had appeared at the flap of her tent like a bloody accusing spirit, wild-eyed and streaked with gore; but Cat could not remember that part. He did remember finding himself on a pallet of soft fur, turning his head, seeing by lantern light the healer stooped over Sticks. She had a black bag beside her. When she reached into it, Cat sat up so suddenly that his head spun. "Don't!"

Startled, she looked toward him. "Don't what?" she demanded querulously.

"Don't put Sticks in the bag."

"I wasn't going to." She took something glittering from the bag, bent over Sticks. Cat's mouth was dry, his tongue like wood. His left arm felt stiff; looking down, he found it bandaged. He sank back on his pallet.

The healer replaced her tool in the bag. "Why did you think I'd put him in here?"

"I dreamed. I thought — "

"Thought what?"

"I thought you were the Taker of Children," he muttered.

She glared at him. "I am."

Or that was what he thought she said; it could all have been a dream, because when he came clearly to himself again, he found day spilling in through the tent flap. The healer sat near him, legs drawn up, head resting on knees — the same posture that Cloud often took. When Cat stirred, she did, too, and he found himself looking into her red-rimmed eyes.

"Is Sticks — "

"Alive? Yes, barely. Will he stay that way? No, not for more than a few hours." The healer looked away, then said roughly, "I'm sorry."

Cat lay back. "Short-Hands killed him."

"What killed him?"

"Short-Hands. A boy."

The healer stared at him. Lines pulled at the corners of her eyes and mouth, making her look old in the morning light. "No," she said. "No boy killed him. Men killed him. They did it two hundred years before he was even born."

Cat looked at her uncertainly.

She ran a hand through her dishev-



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eled, hacked-short hair. "Oh, hell. How is your arm?"

"It hurts. Can I move it?"

"Bone's all right. I cleaned the wound, stopped the bleeding, did some muscle repair. You ought to wear the arm in a sling for a while. Oh, I kept some of your blood."

"For what?"

Her smile was wry. "Call it payment." She tapped a small gray box, studded with tiny gleaming lights, like multicolored sparks of fire. "It's in the analyzer here. It's safe enough; I don't do magic with it." After another moment, she got to her feet. "I have to feed my mount. You must be thirsty. Waterskin there, next to the bag. Sit by your friend for a little. He may wake up; if he does, talk to him if you like. He won't feel pain. That gift at least I can give him. But he may be afraid."

Cat crawled across the tent, amazed at the aches he found doing so. Sticks lay on his back, his face pale, his ribs heaving with each breath. Cat fumbled for his hand. He sat there for several minutes, looking, thinking; then he felt the hand beneath his move. Sticks fluttered his eyelids. "Cat?"

"Here. Lie quiet. We're in the healer's tent."

"I saw Short-Hands come. I climbed up on the rock, quiet. He didn't hear me. That was a good move, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Short-Hands is a fine hunter. To climb without his hearing was very good."

"I wish I had been stronger. He threw his spear before he came close enough for me to jump him. I wish —is he dead?"

"No. Not yet."

"Is there another way?"

Cat set his jaw. "That is for him to decide."

Sticks mumbled something, then faded back into sleep. The healer returned, touched Sticks, listened to his chest. "He'll sleep now," she said. "It will be like this for some time. Make yourself useful — go see to the fire. I'll call you if he awakes."

Cat found the fire dark and dead. The healer had laid in a plentiful supply of oilwood, but he had no flint. He searched through the cold ashes until he found a jagged shard of charred black wood that showed one orange spark. Carefully Cat brought it to his mouth and gave the fire the life of his breath, gently at first, so the spark pulsed brighter, darker, brighter, darker, brighter still ... then he breathed harder, and the spark grew. Finally, a lick of flame showed briefly; and when it came again, Cat was ready with some tufts of dry grass. The fire devoured them, then began to gnaw on some thin twigs of oilwood. Soon it burned steadily in the morning air. Cat built it up, and turned to find the healer just outside her tent, arms folded, watching him.

"Thank you," she said.



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"Is Sticks — "

"Just the same."

"Are you sure he'll die?"

She nodded.

"But can't you do something? You're the healer — "

She barked a short, mirthless laugh. "It would take more skill than mine, boy. I suppose you're as ignorant as the rest of them. What do you know about history? About the Earth?"

He looked at her, not understanding. "My mother told me about the Earth."

"Really. What did she say?"

"I — I don't remember."

The healer sniffed. "Did she tell you why the children die? No, I see she didn't. Well, boy, a long time before you were born, before even I was born — and that makes it one hell of a long time indeed — we human beings came to this world all set to begin something brave and new. We had one big ship; you call it a moon now, but it was a ship. We unloaded it, began to make a new life, and then we lost touch with Earth. We never knew why, or what happened to her, but we lost her. But we didn't lose our petty quarrels or our bullheaded territoriality. Before you knew it, we had ourselves a nasty little war. It was just fine. All the technology we had established in two centuries of settlement burned away in seconds."

"I — I don't understand."

"Hell, boy, neither do I. But the upshot was, we poisoned ourselves, and parts of the world. We killed off so many people in the process that we may have ruined the race's chance to survive here. Maybe we threw away its last chance anywhere." She looked hard at him, her gray eyes as impenetrable as stone. "Understand this: What those men did before either of us was born made it hard for grown-ups to bear children, hard for children to survive. And it doesn't get better with time; it gets worse. Each year fewer of your people roam the plains, each year more babies are born already dead. Another two generations, three, and the plains will be scoured clean of mankind. Except for — "

Cat waited for her to finish. "Except for?" he prompted at last.

"Citadels," she said. "D'you know of them? No, how could you?" The healer nodded toward the crackling fire. "It's like that spark you blew. That's what the Citadels are — a few little sparks of humankind, struggling to stay warm and alive, fighting the dark, trying to keep going until the world heals itself. You see, some people, very few of them, are whole in their bodies, are able to have healthy children. If they gather in the Citadels, if they and their descendants scratch out a living for, oh, God knows how many years, then our spark might burn again. We might be able to live in the world again. If we have the chance. If we have the sense."



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Cat frowned. "If the Citadels are real, why do the people outside let them go on? Why don't they come in, too, if it is all as you say?"

The woman's smile was thin and bitter as a fresh cut, before the blood begins to flow. "We in the Citadels *won* the damned war, child. Our ancestors *won* the damned thing. We may not have much left, but we have enough technology — magic, you'd think it — to keep intruders out. It isn't easy; it hurts some of us, and we become healers, helping the outsiders to easier deaths. But it's death in the end for them all; and there's nothing we can do about it, except give up and join them in death. That we cannot do."

"But if all the outsiders got together — "

"They won't. It's easy to keep them out; and it gets easier every year. Outsiders are a dwindling people." She straightened, then turned to look inside the tent. She shook her head and turned again. "I thought I heard your friend, but he's still sleeping." She looked with calculating eyes at Cat. "You'd find the Citadel where I belong strange, boy. People live there like people, not animals. They work hard, probably harder than you do, but they work at human things —they build, they plan, they create. Some of them are crazy enough to become healers."

"I'd like to see it."

"Hell, why d'you think I'm telling you this? I'm inviting you, stupid. Your blood shows you can father healthy children — but only if you can find a healthy mate, and you won't do that in the outlands."

Cat stood in the drifting blue smoke of the oilwood fire, feeling its heat sharp on the back of his calves. "You," he whispered. "You are the Taker of Children."

"I've taken a few. But only if they gave promise of living, and only when they wished to come." She frowned. "You've loosened your dressing. You ought to wear a sling. Here, let me see to it."

Cat watched her nimble fingers. A thousand questions danced in his mind, but none found their way to his tongue, and so he stood silent, and later sat and stared into the fire with eyes that did not see.

Sticks-for-Legs woke three times after that, each time weaker. Once he spoke to his mother, pestering her with questions about the world and the things it contained; and he listened, as though the long-vanished woman explained it all to him now, when he stood on the brink of leaving it. His last time awake, he was quite clear in his mind, and he spoke to Cat of the things he would miss: sunrise in spring, swimming in summer, crisp abbels in fall, snowslides in winter. Hesitantly, Sticks asked Cat not to hurt Short-Hands; Cat could not reply.


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Sticks sighed. "I'm not afraid. I don't hurt anymore. But I'm tired." He stretched himself, breathed deeply twice, and then breathed no more.

Cat closed the eyes and folded the hands across the thin chest. He stepped out under six moons and wept. After a time, the healer placed a hand on his shoulder, a hand surprisingly soft. "I'm sorry."

"Will you bury him? We cover our dead."

"If you like."

"I'll go now."

"Not with me? Not to the Citadel?"

He shook his head. "Thank you for telling me about it. But I have something to do." He had dropped his spear on the far side of the campfire. He picked it up on the way out of camp, fingered his knife hilt, and turned south. He did not look back.

Cat took the distance slowly. The night grew old. Moons set, and others rose; and as the sun reddened the east, he came again to the place of the boulders. A small fire burned there, and a young rab roasted over it. Short-Hands looked up as Cat neared. "Sticks?" he asked.

"Dead."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to — "

"It would have happened anyway."

Short-Hands nodded, reached for his spear, stood. He indicated the roasting rab with his foot. "Eat it if you win. No sense wasting it; it was hard enough to catch."

Short-Hands circled to the left, hefting his spear. Cat turned to keep him in front. Short-Hands was good, but clumsy in small ways. If you watched his feet, you knew what his mind was planning. Cat lifted his own spear, his bandaged left arm awkwardly counterbalancing. In his mind he saw the thrust of arm, the flight of spear, the quivering shaft. He could kill Short-Hands now.

The other boy stopped in his circling as Cat cocked his arm. Short-Hands tensed, ready to duck, to avoid the spear, then to charge his unarmed opponent. Cat cried sharply, reached for the spearhead with his left hand, and brought the shaft down hard across his knee.

Short-Hands had dropped and feinted defensively. His eyes widened as Cat's spear haft splintered, falling away in two pieces.

Cat stood glaring at him. He stretched out a shaking finger. "You win," he said. "The children are yours. Two males will grow to cast-out age in the winter. Protect them. The four little girls are too small to leave alone for long. Keep them safe. I tell you this, now: if ever I come again, I will bring no weapon and I will not fight. Tell Cloud that. And tell her, tell them all, that Sticks died a brave death."

Short-Hands rose to his feet. "I'll tell them."

Cat spun on his heel and walked away.

The healer had left behind her a



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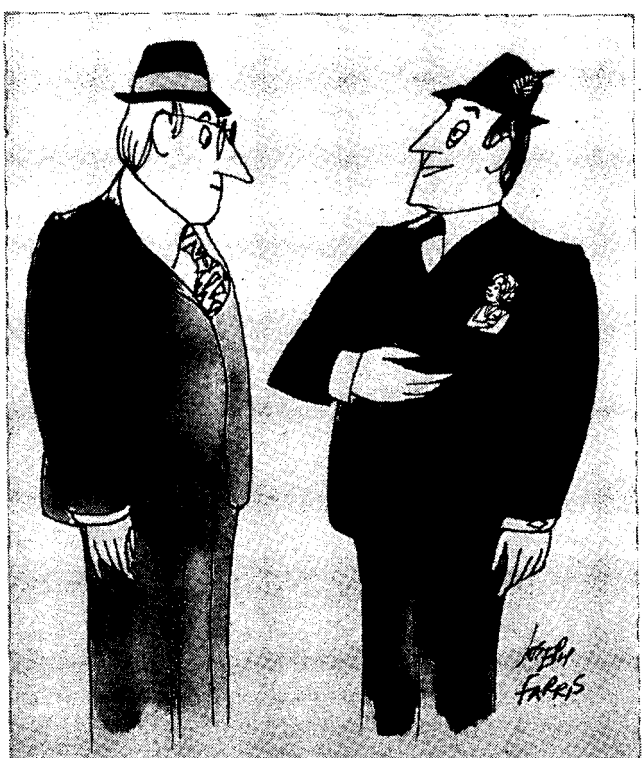
mounded heap of rock, as she had promised, and on it she had placed three small blue flowers, the autumn-blooming sunthrift the little girls in camp sometimes picked. Cat took them off and threw them away. In their place he left his bone knife atop the cairn. "Here, Sticks. For the journey," he told his friend. Then, weaponless, waterless, he moved away, heading north.

The healer had traveled slowly. He climbed a dune and saw her ahead, an irregular dark silhouette moving across the light sandy soil of the desert's edge. Cat cried loudly and waved his good arm above his head. The spot stopped moving, and he saw an answering wave.

Cat took a deep breath and ran like his namesake, down the slope of the dune, away from the past, into whatever the future held.




*"Have you met the little woman?"*



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*In which Freud, in space, reaffirms that, whether dealing with tentacles or legs, it is the mind that controls everything. Mr. Malzberg is working on a series of related stories that will be published by Del Rey.*

# Bedside Manor

BY

**BARRY N. MALZBERG**

Again and again, Freud had explained the situation to the Vegans. "I am not capable of performing procedures of an orthopedic nature," he had pointed out. "Although my degree is in medicine, my specialty is diseases of the *mind.* I have lost virtually all of my medical training anyway. I cannot help you. I cannot do what you request." Nonetheless, the Vegans are insistent. They are precise in their demands. In their execrable English, funneled through translating devices they have brought, they have made clear that they will accept no protests, that they have defined their needs and Freud's capacity. "We need assistance," they have said, "we need assistance rendered restoring broken fusion and you such will restore." Or something like that.

Freud feels he is a broken man. Matters since the Vegans overtook the craft have been disastrous; even before, this was a bizarre and doomed mission for which he should never have been reconstructed. The crew is nowhere to be found; all of them apparently have been removed from the *Whipperley,* and now Vegans are asking him to be their orthopedist. Nightmares given flesh: multilimbed, multitentacled, angular, unstable Vegans of various sizes and colors have appeared before him with mangled appendages, seeking help. Freud is no orthopedist. The miracles of later centuries' diagnosis and reconstruction are wholly unavailable to him. Nonetheless, the Vegans seek assistance. Most have been damaged on the voyage, they have explained, and it will be many years — or perhaps the issue is one of centuries — until they return to their Vegan equivalent of home base. In the meantime, Freud



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is to make repairs as best he can.

"But where are the ship's crew, my fellow victims, the survivors of the invasion?" Freud has asked. The aliens will not reply. They stand shockingly mute on the issue, as if Freud had hallucinated crew, captain, psychosis and had actually been alone on this large craft. But he knows differently; the crew was real, and he had tried to help them. Now, in the wake of the attack, there has been only silence, solitude, a series of rooms in which Freud has eaten, drank, paced, meditated, consulted with aliens, all without human occupancy. For all he knows, all have perished in the invasion but he who has been saved for orthopedics. Then again — the aliens will concede nothing — perhaps he has merely been isolated from the remainder of the crew to do his work. There are a *lot* of mangled aliens. It is all very puzzling. He does not quite know what to think.

He has always been humble. This has been the secret of what modest accomplishment he can claim; it is that face (Freud suspects) that has evaded his biographers, raised false expectations. Certainly he makes no unusual claim for his ability, and he well understands the richness, the depth, the sheer perversity of that wicked instrument, the human unconscious. How much less he must know of aliens! Nonetheless, this accumulation of horrors (call him xenophobic, but they are horrors) admires him. They show a kind of reverence. He sees awe in their attitude, submission in their demeanor that Freud never obtained from the haughty and recalcitrant Viennese. The aliens believe that he can heal, and for the life of him he will not desert that task.

And besides, Freud fears that once they perceive how incompetent are his orthopedics, action will be taken even more dreadful than simple invasion. He retains his survival instinct. The death wish is at tenuous distance. Reconstructed, he wants to live; he fears the oblivion of the shafts once again. Intellectually, the death wish may suspire, but emotionally — and it is the emotions that dominate — he wants to go on, retain consciousness, not be blocked again. Endlessly curious, a scientist yet, he wants to confront the middle 2300s, the new aspect of the Vegan probe, even though he would never have imagined in the distant centuries of his life that he would be able to confront, let alone control, this situation. There is some evidence of rampant id here, but Freud does not care to look deeply. Thoughtful as he may be, his own self-analysis has always been shaky.

"You will with us come," the jailer Vegan says, standing politely at the access to Freud's room. Apparently, another sequence is to begin. He has spent some time in troubled sleep, some time in troubled thought, a lit-



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tle less time in troubled eating and staring through the portholes (he was never able to find any timepieces on the *Whipperley*), and now the aliens apparently have another task for him. Freud rises slowly. The Vegan reaches out a tentacle in support as Freud succumbs to a wave of giddiness, feels the panels shift underneath. Purely hysteric, to be sure.

"You well are?" the Vegan says. Freud shrugs. "You must be well are," the Vegan repeats. The translation device that has been placed on the wall crackles with menace. "Report," the Vegan says.

"Oh, yes," Freud says in a mollifying way. "I well are. I well be." It is best not to contest these aliens. There are certain universals, he suspects, and this is one of them: hostility meets only hostility. He must come through this. Perhaps the crew is merely in hiding; perhaps a troubled Earth is monitoring all of this on viewscreens and is at the moment in the process of plotting rescue. It is vital to maintain these delusions, to keep up his spirits if nothing else. Moment by moment, he wishes to live. At the end of this, no good awaits, but curiosity has pushed and sustained him through all these travails and will continue to do so, he hopes, right through to the end.

Toddling behind his jailer at a rapid clip, Freud strides through the vacant corridors of the *Whipperley*. Sounds of space, the watery hum of flight overtake him. Through the unmasked portholes, he can see the spin of constellations, lurch of stars, dazzle of light. The captain on the Venus expedition, that disaster, had warned him that these effects were false; holography provided an illusion of geography, and the spaceways themselves were vast, slick, and empty for the mysterious drive, but Freud cherishes his illusions as the treasure of the unconscious and will not sacrifice them. The alien, too, seems transfixed. "Space is," the Vegan says, not breaking stride, "impressive very. Space most expressive is." For these Vegans, a cryptic and inarticulate group if Freud has ever seen one (they remind him of *shtetl* Jews in their insularity and parochial ways), this is almost a poetic statement. Freud says nothing in response. There really is, most of the time, nothing to say to them.

Moving along the corridors quickly, alternating his gait between a toddle and more determined scuttling when he falls behind, Freud tries to keep his mind smooth and blank, warns himself that there should be no more of this introspection. It is pointless and takes him nowhere; he should be a wholly circumstantial creature now, accepting events without comment. But ever since McCormick shot him — even more than had been the case in what he thinks of as his previous "life" — Freud has been unable to close off the inward verbal-


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izations. "How silly, how mundane, how utterly without vision or relevance are most of the patterns of our consciousness, mere lisping chatter, empty reflection of the present," he had written (or had meant to write, anyway) once — and yet he, no less than any of his miserable patients, has now proved unable to block out the musing, empty commentary upon his life, the sound of that idiot auditor replicating what is seen with what must then be compulsively enumerated. His studies were filled with recognition of human vulnerability and shared plight; nonetheless, it is depressing to understand how truly little control there is. Perhaps this has always been the secret at the center: there is no control at all. Nor — despite the attractive lure of hypnosis, autosuggestion, dream therapy, regression — was control there ever.

But what to do? It changes nothing. The Vegan at length leads him into an enclosure that he has not seen before, an enclosure so large that Freud would not have believed that it could have existed on this craft. It is an amphitheater. Enormous, ill-fitting ceilings jut into one another at an apparent height of more than a hundred yards. Dim beams of light intersect; spun from unknown sources, the intensity of this light has a distant prismatic effect. Slightly beyond, he sees Vegans, hundreds of Vegans seated in ranked rows, looking at him respectfully. In front of them, on a table, lies a Vegan in what appears to be a posture of distress. The aspect of this is mysterious and powerful — metaphoric in the extreme, he would think, if one could only get past the pain.

Freud, in his few contacts and stumbling efforts to communicate with these Vegans (could he call himself an alienist among the aliens? that would be amusing if there were someone with whom to share this), has learned, if nothing else, to distinguish various levels of function, and the Vegan on the table appears to be severely crippled. His guide gestures with a long blue tentacle, directs Freud to the table. He goes there, stands by the alien's head, smelling the ozone that drifts thinly from the inert form. Slices of light meet at the fine, abysmal head with its small crest. Unwillingly, Freud bows his head to cover from the light, finds himself in a meditative posture, staring at the alien.

And at that moment Freud feels, not for the first time on this terrible expedition, a flicker of real apprehension. If McCormick were to burst again through an arras in the amphitheater, brandishing the gun to kill him yet again, he could not feel the consternation that he does now. There is a moment of terrifying disorientation. "What is going on?" Freud says, the words pulled from him slowly and uncertainly. Amplifiers boom them throughout the enclosure; his


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own great voice shudders back. "This is impossible," he says, but as a subvocalization this time. "It is truly impossible."

In the distance he hears a series of dull thuds, as if tentacles were being brought against one another. Is one of the witnesses applauding? Could such a thing be? He feels the laughter bubbling within him, and yet the situation is so terrible, so serious, that the laughter is annulled at once. He must confront the situation, no matter how hallucinatory. This is the impact of his science: *there are no hallucinations.*

The guide alien points to the form on the table. "Cure," it says. "Cure this now." From his angle, Freud cannot quite make out the aspect of the ranked rows, but he senses an even more intense fixity of attention, a gathered and ominous quiet. This would seem to be a clinic of some sort, the ship perhaps become a hospital ship for Vegans, and he has been asked as the *Whipperley*'s doctor to conduct a demonstration. There is no precedent for this situation; none whatsoever, living or after death. "Ambulation he cannot," the guide says, "and you therefore will cure, yes?"

*Yes, what?* Freud thinks. Affirm, but to what purpose? But the guide alien has moved away deliberately, passed across Freud's field of vision through the intersecting slants of light, and has joined the others — could it be said "colleagues?" — in the last of the ranked rows. There is nothing more to come from there. Freud looks at the Vegan on the table. It is enormous for these aliens, eight feet tall, perhaps, with curious, ropy tentacles thinly coated by slime, the tentacles fanning out in various directions, hanging brokenly to the side. A single thin strap bolts the alien to the table, less a restraint, Freud thinks, than a hobble. He hears respiration for the first time. It is shallow and irregular.

"Listen," he says, facing the audience, "listen to me, please. I must make a point here. I am not a specialist of limbs or extensions; I am a doctor of another specialty. I treat diseases of the mind. In my own time, I would be called an alienist. I am unqualified — "

"Alienist," one of the Vegans says from the rear. There is a long, thick silence. The three syllables — *ay-len-yist* — hang in the recycled air of the *Whipperley*..

"Well," Freud says heavily, "this is a semantic difference, a semantic problem. This refers to one who treats — the word *alienist,* I mean — one who treats disorders of the mind — " He breaks off. It is entirely abstruse, and the pun has trapped him. He loves puns and had meant to write of them. "I cannot treat Vegans," he says instead. "I am incapable of administering procedure to those not of my race. Do you not have medical personnel?"



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"We medical personnel have," a voice says. "We medical personnel always. This not of concern is."

"But surely your own personnel, your medical advisers — "

"He ambulating cannot," the voice says, pitched somewhat higher but unquestionably the same Vegan. He can sort them out after a fashion; individuation is possible. These aliens, no less than humans, can be categorized. "It our assumption is that the trouble be of a psychotronic nature."

"What?"

"Is that your word? This is how emerge."

"Psychotronic?" Freud says. He pauses. The amplification of so many voices is unpleasant; in the enormous, arching enclosure, he is now beginning to sound like the Vegans: *everything* now has become alien. His mind scrambles, then slowly he finds the sense of it. The relief that overtakes him is so enormous as to feel like a blow in the stomach. "Oh, yes," he says, exhaling rapidly, "*psychosomatic*. A hysterical illness. An inability to perform by reasons of mind. Functional rather than organic."

"Exactly," the voice says. "Exquisitely phrased. We cannot so phrase as you can, honor your skill. He one of us essential is. He must be made to ambulate again."

Freud shrugs. He could continue this bizarre dialogue further, but what does it matter? Is there any more sense to be imposed upon Vegans than human? It is *all* bizarre, all demented: the experiences on all the reconstructions have been uniform in their incongruity, their bewildering absurdity. He can take these Vegans to be no less strange, no less confluent with himself than was the crew of human lunatics he was allegedly to service. It does not matter, he reminds himself. In all of these moments — this is how he has retained his balance and control during all the periods in space — he imagines that he must be lying hallucinating from the impact of the bullet; when he dies, which cannot objectively be a long time from now, all of this will have been wiped cleanly from his consciousness. It must be so because if it is not, he is plainly — leader as he is of the most profound school of human psychology in all of history — out of control and plunging toward a tragedy whose most abysmal aspect is that he cannot even enumerate it, and this is something with which he will not deal.

In the meantime — impossible as it might seem — there is work. He removes the restraint, stares at the crippled Vegan. The alien opens luminous eyes in the center of its head, replicating human curiosity, and stares coolly. What is there to lose? What difference does it make, anyway? "Walk," Freud says. "Get off this table."

"Cannot," the alien says.

Freud takes a tentacle, finds it


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stiff, articulates it through a presumptive radius of forty-five degrees. Mild rigidity with some residual stiffness, yes, but an apparent retention of reflex. This much he knows. "Of course you can," he says. "Your incapacity is thought hysteric."

Perhaps he is planting information, but there are few precedents here. "Probably hysteric," he repeats.

"What is hysteric?"

"It is difficult explaining this. It is merely a term." Freud stares out into the haze. "Is it necessary to go on with this?" he says. There is no answer. There is never any answer at clinics, of course; auditors are there merely to observe. Very well. "Your colleagues adjudge you capable of rising, of walking, of moving in a normal fashion," Freud says. "They simply feel that you choose not to for mental reasons."

"That is not so," the Vegan says reasonably. "All of my limbs are locked, that is why I am in this condition." Freud realizes that he is still holding the tentacle, allows it to fall. It whisks to a newly jointed position. "Why would I choose not to walk if I could walk?" the Vegan repeats. "All of this is most preposterous."

Freud dimly recalls the early days in Vienna. He is equipped to deal with objections of this nature, although never, of course, in circumstances quite like this. "Suppose you tell me," he says. "Suppose you advise me why you cannot walk, why you have made that choice."

"Choice? I have no choice." The amplifiers boom, the statement resonates; Freud can apprehend that he has touched a cell of resistance. "What choices are any of us offered? It is my fate."

Fate. Freud thinks of this. There is some indication, from the affect the Vegan has shown, that there may indeed be some psychic component to the paralysis (if paralysis it could be said to be). But without a knowledge of the history of these people, their culture, the modes and mores; without any knowledge of the inner dream life of the stricken alien, how can he be expected to treat? He would address the ranks out there to this issue, but he understands, without even beginning, that it is quite hopeless, quite pointless. They will observe and observe until they are past that point of consideration, and then they will merely stop. His outcome is not in his hands.

But when was it ever? Was it ever any different? Freud thinks. When Jung broke with him, when the wolf man bowed his head and wept, when he felt the luminescent cancer flowering in his jaw and knew that in the fullness of time it would kill him, when the crazy Chicago publisher came into his office ... did he have any control then? His studies, his vision, everything that he has lived have merely prepared him after all for this understanding: there is no control. Fractured aliens, hysteric Vegans, des-



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pairing crew rattling around a starship vast enough to contain an amphitheater, the dazzling twenty-fourth century ... does any element of it possess more of an impossibility than any other?

So be, then, be a bit of a charlatan. If it worked in Vienna, if it happened on Venus, then it is worth trying here as well. Dazzlement, tricks, manipulations of event; that is all that they can understand, anyway. This is what they want. Freud seizes a tentacle in each hand, presses them against one another. He hears a dull, rubbery crackle. "There," he says, "you are cured. I have disjointed the peritoneum. Get up and walk."

The Vegan stares at him. "Disjointed the what?"

"The peritoneal cavity. It controls the neuromuscular system, the autonomous medulla. All of it has been in that single rapid gesture recoordinated. Get up and walk."

"I cannot. I do not understand."

"You do not have to understand," Freud says. Disdain fills him; the same disdain he felt a long time ago when he knew for the first time that he was right and that all of them, all of them were fools. This is merely foolishness of another order. "Get up from that table and *walk,*" he says. "Enough of this foolishness. You must accept responsibility for your life."

"But I *do* — "

"Then get up and walk."

Freud palpates the tentacles, feels them rise to heat against his palms. There is an unpleasant sexual tension, a sexual connotation to this act, but he will not consider it further. Homosexuality is not the only implication of this enounter, which is, for all he knows, the first intimate congress between man and Vegan. The alien lurches in his grasp, then slowly moves. He rolls upon the table. He falls with a dull thud to the floor. Freud, hanging onto the tentacles, falls atop him. The contact is shocking, yet not sheerly unpleasant. The alien is resilient; the rubbery odor fills Freud's nostrils. Slowly, Freud is able to disengage and roll free. The alien similarly rolls, comes to a stop, then extends tentacles, and inch by inch lurches to a crouch, then to a standing position. Freud feels rather than hears the applause pulsating unevenly through the cells of his being. The room is shaking. The Vegan is at fullest height now. Slowly, determinedly, it begins to move away from Freud, past the table on which it had been strapped, through the strobes of light, and then toward the audience. The light seems to brighten. Freud feels himself transfixed. The applause can now be heard. It is enormous.

"Do you see?" he says, against it, the amplifiers carrying his message to the Vegans, through the ship, to —for all he knows — the universe. "The mind controls everything. The mind in its cunning, its convolution, its leaping, and its possibility; it is the



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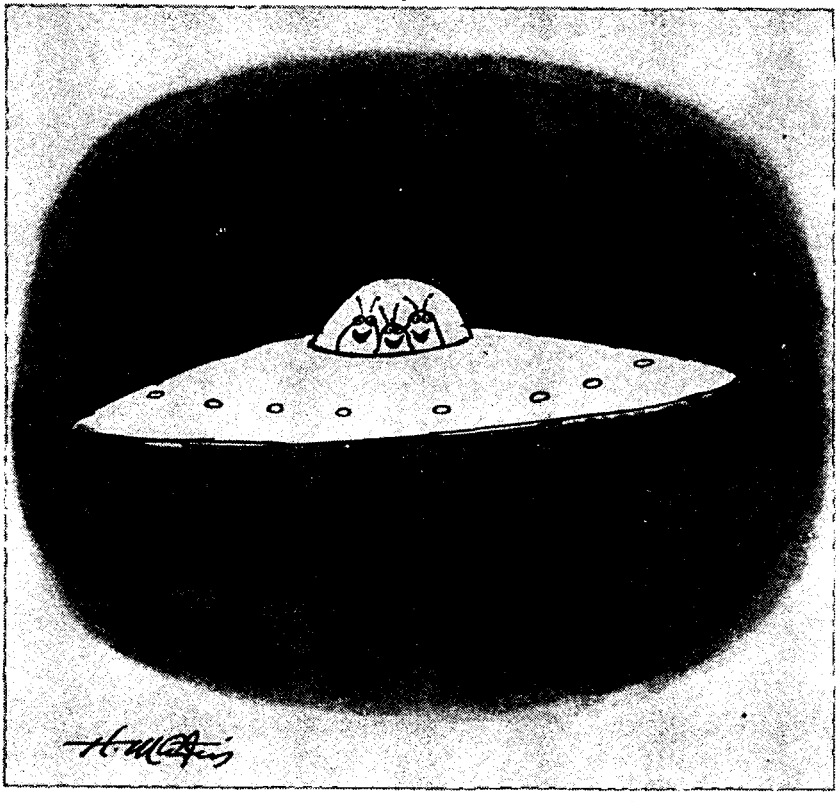
mind that triumphs, carrying the body along as its willing or unwilling messenger and servant. Do you understand? Do you understand that now?"

But surrounded as he is by aliens who have plunged into the aisles joyously to congregate, surrounded as he is by congratulatory tentacles and limbs, flaps and claws, ecstatic mouths uttering his name and accomplishment, he cannot be sure if he has gotten that through or not. The aliens seem to be dancing now. They seem to be dancing around him.

"You," he hears one of them say, "you doctor to the stars, *you* fix everybody now. You make us good, you make us gooder." And Sigmund Freud, feeling the first impact of his mission, the first sense of his obligation, feels himself, doctor to the stars, transfixed by more than light, as softly, softly, triumphant Vegans carry him back to his quarters, off to his fate.



*"Over the black hole and through Milky Way to Grandfather's pod we go!"*



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*This striking fantasy about a wonderful silver balloon is from a new writer who tells us that she is 32, married to a philosophy professor at Stanford, and is by trade a graphic designer. Ms. Etchemendy has published several novels for young readers, most recently STRANGER FROM THE STARS, Avon 1983.*

# Clotaire's Balloon

BY
**NANCY ETCHEMENDY**

As I approach my seventieth birthday, I find myself thinking more and more often of Aunt Henrietta, and of the terrible thing my brother, Harry, and I did to her those many years ago. Autumn has arrived, and I am growing old; perhaps that accounts for it. I have recently taken to spending an hour each morning on the porch. From my chair, I am occasionally lucky enough to see a balloon or two drift by, high and huge and wonderful, silent as clouds. Sometimes a breeze rattles the sumac leaves just the right way, or I catch a breath of apple cider on the air. Then I think that perhaps I understand Aunt Henrietta as I never did when I was young. It isn't regret that I feel, exactly — something more like wistfulness. If only Henrietta had fully respected our childhood view of justice; if only Clotaire the ballonist had respected it a little less.

You see, when Harry was eight and I was ten, our mother fell ill. At that time, we had wonderful lodgings in the city, in an ornate copper-roofed house that overlooked one of the parks. Harry and I were in the habit of sneaking about in the dark after we were supposed to be asleep. One evening, early in the spring, we peeked around the drawing room doorway. By the warm, uneven light of the fire, we saw Mother in her dressing gown and quilt, seated in the largest and softest of the armchairs. Father sat beside her on the floor, leaning against her knees, an empty brandy glass tilted in his hand. I had never seen him sit on the floor before. Neither of them spoke or moved, but something about the way they stared into the flames made me feel quite empty and afraid. At that moment, I


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realized for the first time just how ill Mother really was.

Father's subsequent actions bore this out. In the middle of May, we moved to a house in the country, where Mother spent most of her time lying in bed in a sunny room upstairs. The doctor gave orders that Harry and I were to see her no more than an hour each day, and that even then we must be quiet and try not to excite her. This news terrified and infuriated me. In retribution, I took to breaking vases and scattering silverware about on the floor, while Harry looked on in awe.

Two things happened because of this. First, Harry and I were firmly encouraged to stay outdoors most of the time, which is how we discovered Clotaire. And second, Father sent for his sister, Henrietta. So Clotaire and Aunt Henrietta entered our life together, the same way in which they departed from it.

One of those first country spring afternoons, as we stood with Father on the spacious lawn in front of our new house, Harry and I spied a balloon drifting high in the distance. I had never seen a balloon before, and wasn't at all sure what it could be. I still remember just how it looked — shining silver, with a magnificent sun, moon, and the stars about its circumference. It belonged to Clotaire, of course, though we didn't know it yet.

I jumped up and down, trying to see it better over the treetops, and cried, "What is it? It's so beautiful!"

"That's a balloon, Catherine," said Father. "There's a man hanging from it in a basket. He's taking a ride."

Harry leaped up as well, his cheeks all aglow, shouting, "Daddy, make him bring it here! I want a ride, too!"

Father laughed. His laughter in those days was brief and quiet, and always made me think of Mother, lying pale in her bed. "I'm afraid he's too far away to hear us," he said, reaching down to tousle Harry's brown curls.

Harry squirmed, but flashed one of those empty, sunny smiles of his. Father looked down at him, returned the smile rather stiffly, and said, "Come inside now, children. I have a surprise for you."

So, shielding our eyes and pointing at the receding silver balloon, Harry and I stumbled up the path to the front door, and ran smack into Father's surprise — Aunt Henrietta. He hadn't told us that he was expecting her, and I suppose we must have been playing and thus missed noticing the carriage that brought her from the station. At any rate, the unexpected sight of her ample, stalwart figure in the doorway affected us like a bolt of lightning from a cloudless sky. Harry and I were dumbstruck.

Stubbornness and the smells of starched lace and lavender hovered around Aunt Henrietta, mothlike. We had never known her very well. She lived very far away, visited our house



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only one week of each year, and always brought with her a suit of scratchy new underwear for each of us. She taught at a private girls' school, and raised large maroon roses in her spare time. I had two vivid memories of her, both of which at that moment crashed around inside my head like trapped finches. The first was of her slapping my hand as I reached for a third piece of cake at teatime. The second was of Harry's gurgling screams as she held him by the ear and washed his mouth out with laundry soap. He had made the mistake of saying aloud that he "didn't give a hoot about the heathen children of China," a turn of phrase that he had picked up from Father.

I suppose Harry and I must have looked a little bewildered as we stared up at her on the doorstep. She possessed hugely expressive black eyebrows, which she now raised into swooping arches that reached almost to the line of her stone-gray hair. "Children!" she said, her voice warm and sweet as those disgusting fig tarts she loved to eat. "How delightful to see you again."

Father put a hand on each of our shoulders. "Henrietta's come to stay with us until Mother gets better. Isn't that good of her?"

The eyebrows dropped, and a sort of smile crackled its way across Aunt Henrietta's powdery face. "Yes. I've come to help your father look after you for a little while. Won't that be nice?"

I suppose she thought she was doing the right thing. Perhaps she even thought this manner of sacrifice would assure her of a place in heaven. After all, she was a solid and confident woman, with lucid ideas of the world. In all likelihood, it never even occurred to her that she might only make matters worse by volunteering her services.

Harry and I were too young to see any of this, however. I knew only that Aunt Henrietta's presence at a time like this must mean that my mother was in terrible danger.

I started the new venture off well — with a bloodcurdling scream followed by, "I won't! I won't let you look after me. It's Mother's job. Leave me alone!" I ran straight across the lawn and into the woods, where I found solace in the rough branches of a maple tree. I cried until dark, when, as no one came looking for me, I climbed down and made my way home, feeling hungry and deserted.

Aunt Henrietta's presence in the house caused Harry and me to spend more time than ever out-of-doors. By the middle of July, when we first met Clotaire, we already knew exactly which trees in our woods were favored by cardinals, and which by mourning doves; we had explored every turnstile and rock wall inch by inch, and even befriended the great black bull that sometimes gazed in the field


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adjoining our raspberry patch.

Most important of all, we had learned to guess when the wonderful silver balloon was most likely to come drifting past. It had to be just the right kind of day. There had to be a line of dust shimmering like a halo on the road, and the sky had to look like Mother's blue crystal vase. Then, if luck and the high breeze came our way, we might catch a glimpse of the balloon, shining like an errant moon in the perfect sunlight. Now and then, it came so near to us that we could discern and wave to the man in the basket. Sometimes he waved in return, and sometimes he did not.

One afternoon during a fine round of our favorite game, missionaries and cannibals, we heard a strange sound. Harry and I stood still as rocks and listened. It was a noise like the beating of gigantic wings, accompanied by that odd roar and bellow that bulls sometimes produce when they are angry or afraid.

"Cathy, there's something in the field," whispered Harry. The dry willow branch he'd been using as a cannibal spear dropped unnoticed from his hand. That, and a slight croak in his voice, made the hair on my arms stand right up beneath the sleeves of my blouse.

In a moment I saw what Harry was talking about — a huge glowing thing that moved in waves just beyond the raspberries and the hedge. I got down on my hands and knees, crept through our secret hedge tunnel, and peeked out on the other side.

Harry was just behind me, not to be outdone by a girl. "Is it anything awful?"

I made room for him beside me. "Come and see."

Before us in that ordinary field was a sight that visits the dreams of an old woman to this very day. A tall but otherwise unremarkable chestnut tree grew there, and caught in its branches was the grand silver balloon. We saw immediately that the basket, all askew, hung empty. But directly beneath it a man lay in the grass, half-propped on his elbows, and looking very distressed indeed. Our friend the black bull pawed the ground no more than two yards away from him.

I stood up for a better look and, as sometimes happens with little girls, fell in love straightaway. I had previously thought that no one could possibly be more handsome and dashing than Father, but as I stood watching in the afternoon sun, I knew that Father had met his match. The fellow sported aviator's breeches and puttees, and a lovely ivory-colored scarf. His eyes, the dazzling color of robins' eggs, were set in a strong, well-tanned face, and his hair and moustache gleamed like heaps of golden coins. Moreover, he seemed clearly in pain and danger. At once I felt capable of even the most arduous rescue. I floated in visions of befriending him and showing him off to Father and



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Aunt Henrietta, who seemed to care so little for me that they would let me sit in a tree by myself half the night.

"We've got to help him," I said. Bravely, and I now think rather stupidly, I walked out into the field and flicked a stone at the bull's broad flank.

The bull looked around, distracted but unconvinced, and Harry yelped, "Don't, Cathy! He'll come after us."

"Nonsense," I said, hoping the handsome aviator could hear me. "The bull knows us. See?" And I clapped my hands and cried, "Shoo!" as loudly as I could.

Sometimes I think that God must station an angel on the shoulder of every little boy and girl, and that only through that device does any child grow to adulthood. My angel must have been hard at work that day, for the bull turned and humped away as if it had been bitten by a fly.

"Shoo!" I said again, and it lumbered off even farther.

Luminous with triumph, I turned to Harry. "Stand right here. Keep yelling 'shoo,' and don't stop until I tell you to."

"But Cathy...." he whispered.

"Do it, or I'll twist your ear off." Poor Harry. I knew all his weaknesses, even in those days.

So Harry crouched, all the little blue veins in his neck standing out, and screamed, "Shoo!" while I ran to the aid of the dashing young balloonist.

"Can you stand up?" I asked, breathless with a combination of excitements.

"*Oui, Mademoiselle,* I think so," he replied. Oh, my knees nearly turned to butter.

I helped him up. But he winced and jerked when he tried to put weight on his leg, so I told him to lean on me. Lean on me he did, heavily and deliciously, as we hurried toward the gate in the hedge. He smelled wonderful, like cold air and lightning and peppermint.

When we stood safely on the other side of the gate, I called, "Run, Harry! Run!"

Screaming like a wounded pigeon, Harry tore through after us, even though the bull did not follow him, its attention having apparently wandered from stranded hero to succulent grass. That is how Harry and I at last made the acquaintance of Clotaire, the ace balloonist.

Later that very afternoon, as Clotaire sat before our fire soaking his foot and ankle in an epsom salts bath, he said a thing that eventually changed our lives. He said, "I owe you a great debt. If there is ever any way in which I can repay it, you must tell me."

The peculiar look in his sky-blue eyes frosted the bones of everyone in the room, even Aunt Henrietta. Her twitchy eyebrows betrayed the nervousness that lay beneath her facade of haughty disapproval. It seemed as if a cold, sharp wind swept past the



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fire, for the flames wavered ever so slightly, though the day was still and mild.

An hour or so later, Father got out our touring car, which he showed off at every opportunity, and drove Clotaire to town. The moment they left the drive, Aunt Henrietta turned to us, her face ratlike in the dim light of the parlor, and said, "You're not to have anything more to do with that disreputable vagabond. Is that clear?"

I knew, of course, that Clotaire was a disreputable vagabond. It was the very reason I liked him so much. I already loathed Aunt Henrietta's imperious commands with such passion that any word from her had the power to make me do just the opposite.

I leaped to my feet and cried, "You're not our mother! You can't make us stop seeing him. I hate you. I hate you!"

For which I got my mouth washed out with laundry soap, while Harry stood by, unable to contain a quiet snicker or two. When the ordeal was over, I stumbled teary-eyes up the stairs, sneaked into Mother's room, and lay down beside her on the bed where she slept. I had a dream that I remember even now. In it, Mother was well again, and we lived in the copper-roofed house that overlooked the park.

I made up my mind that I would do everything in my power to see Clotaire again, as a means of antagonizing Aunt Henrietta, if nothing else. Harry and I commenced spending virtually every waking hour out-of-doors, playing games of make-believe, always keeping a sharp eye out for Clotaire's mighty balloon.

We actually saw him three more times in the course of the next several months. The first two times, he drifted past above the treetops, waving to us. We leaped in the air and waved back to him. But we could not tell whether he called our names or not, for on both occasions he was ascending, and the balloon's burner roared and gushed flames like a dragon from a fairy tale.

The third time, however, the burner was silent, and Clotaire called down, "I will land in the field!" I was, of course, immediately transported to heights of perfect ecstasy.

I suppose I should tell you that many years later, when I was a full-grown woman, I had a suitor who owned a hot-air balloon. I had it on excellent authority that this fellow was an adept balloonist and that his balloon, though it bore an unfortunate resemblance to a large Easter egg, was of the finest make. Yet I never saw him land where he really wanted to, and I never saw him attempt to take off or touch down without at least two strong men on the ground to help him. Whenever I recall Clotaire and that silver ship of his, I am astounded at the amount of control he



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seemed to have over it. Barring unexpected winds, and even then sometimes, he seemed perfectly capable of piloting his unwieldy craft without any aid whatsoever. That is precisely what he was doing on the occasion I now describe.

Harry and I had already reconnoitered the field once on this particular day, and we knew that the bull was nowhere to be seen. When Clotaire called down to us, we tumbled over one another like a couple of young rabbits as we dashed through the hole in the hedge to meet him. Quite clear of the chestnut tree, the balloon's varnished wicker basket thudded to the ground. Just as it began to rise again, Clotaire jumped out, carrying one of the anchor lines. In the blink of an eye, he pounded a long brass peg into the ground and tied the line to it. That was that, and nothing could have looked easier.

Clotaire said not a word as he stood gazing at us. His smile felt like a candle flame in darkness, edged somehow with cold wind and thin air. It made me shiver, frightened me, and delighted me all at once.

"Oh, please, Mr. Clotaire," said Harry, clasping his hands before him, enthralled. "Please take us for a ride!"

I nudged him. "Don't be rude, Harry."

Clotaire rested one hand on his narrow hips and twisted the end of his golden moustache with the other.

"You might not like it. It's a strange world from those heights," he said. How chilly and wonderful those eyes of his were.

I remember my exact reply. Though I didn't know it then, I could not possibly have chosen more fitting words. "Oh, we'd like it fine, wouldn't we, Harry? We *like* strange worlds."

"Well, we shall see," said Clotaire, and he smiled again, as mysteriously as an Acadian statue.

Clotaire lifted us over the rim of the basket as easily as he might have lifted two bags of thistledown, and climbed in after us. He gave the anchor rope a surprisingly gentle tug; the brass peg pulled out, and we rose skyward.

For many years I have contemplated the rarities of that voyage. Some might be inclined to doubt their childhood memories of such events. But I can tell you this: I was born with a keen sense of what is real and what is not, and you may take my word for it. What Harry and I saw while peering over the edge of that basket was real.

Clotaire fired the burner, and we rose past the treetops, up into the cold blue cup of the sky. Not even the slightest breeze stirred the afternoon air, and when we stopped climbing, we hung almost motionless, as if suspended on a string. Below us, we could see our house, the field and the woods, and farther off, the town.

Folding his arms across his chest, Clotaire said, "You do not yet under-


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stand about the worlds. Perhaps you never will, but I shall show you, anyway."

He stretched out his hand and motioned toward the scene below. "This is one world." Then he snapped his fingers.

Harry and I sucked air as a shadow passed across the sun and a cold draft cut into our bones. I looked up, but I could see no clouds, no hawks or ravens, to account for the shadow. In a moment it was gone.

"And this is another world," said Clotaire.

Twenty-five or thirty cows had suddenly appeared in the field with the chestnut tree. Some of them had gotten through the gate and were grazing on our lawn, which looked unkempt and weedy. The house needed paint. "In this world, you never moved to the country," said Clotaire.

*Snap.* Shadows fluttered across the sun, and we spied a middle-aged woman and two children speeding down the drive in Father's motorcar. The noise of the engine floated up to us with eerie clarity. "A world in which your aunt became an avid traveler, and learned tolerance from a Katmandu monk."

*Snap.* "A world in which the rules of civility are not quite the same." Two children looking very much like Harry and me came running across the field. We stared down at them, fascinated. Both of them wore fierce grimaces that revealed sharp yellowish teeth like those of wild rodents. The girl threw rocks at us with her powerful arms, and the boy carried a bundle of pointed sticks.

"Cannibal spears!" cried Harry. "*Real* cannibal spears!"

"I want to meet them," I found my saying.

"Meet them?" The sky rang like a crystal bowl with Clotaire's clear laughter. "They would set upon you and kill you at once." He paused, then added, "Besides, there is something else. They are your counterparts. Touch them, and you cease to exist."

The boy threw a spear at us. It fell miserably short, but the inhuman rage on his face made me shudder. A great claw of terror tightened around me then, as if I stood alone in a dark hallway at night. "Take me home! Please, please take me home!" I cried.

Clotaire looked at me, his eyes blue suns, flaming and freezing. He smiled the Acadian smile, snapped his fingers once more, and the old world lay spread below us again like a familiar quilt.

We descended. Clotaire jumped out, anchored the balloon as before, and lifted us from the basket. No one spoke at first. I watched the rise and fall of his broad shoulders as he breathed, in and out, in and out, the smells of peppermint and lightning.

It was Harry who broke the spell of silence. "Cathy! It's Aunt Henrietta! She's headed this way!"



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The magic evaporated like kerosene on a hot sidewalk. Clotaire saluted us and said, "Adieu. I must be going, but we shall meet again."

Blood warmed my cold cheeks as I watched him vault back into the basket in a single liquid motion. Already, I heard Aunt Henrietta calling us, her voice as coarse and furious as a crow's. "Horrid children! No supper for you."

Harry tugged anxiously at my sleeve.

"Clotaire!" I cried. "Be careful. Don't let any counterparts touch you."

Clotaire waved and pulled out the anchor peg. His words drifted down to us above the roar of the burner as the great silver balloon took to the air. "I have no counterparts."

For many nights after that, I lay in bed and tried to puzzle out a reasonable explanation for what I had seen on that peculiar ride. I never reached any very satisfactory conclusion. And at any rate, all things, even my magical memories of Clotaire, grew unimportant in the weeks that followed, as the doctor, a man as large and plump as a thunderhead, came more and more often to our house. Sometimes he stayed the night. He and Father would emerge from Mother's room in the morning, faces gray and shoulders sagging. Aunt Henrietta would sit in the parlor with them while they drank strong tea or coffee (Father often added brandy to his) and spoke in whispers.

One afternoon well into autumn, the doctor arrived in a great flurry, his round face gleaming with sweat and his thin white hair plastered to his forehead. When Aunt Henrietta opened the door, he said, "I got here as quickly as I could." Aunt Henrietta simply nodded and inclined her head in the direction of Mother's room, whereupon the doctor rushed up the stairs two at a time, huffing like a steam engine.

Harry and I raced after him, and would have followed him into Mother's room, only Aunt Henrietta grasped us by our collars and said, "You'll only be in his way." So we waited — I don't know how long; a few minutes, perhaps — outside that door that seemed larger and darker than it ever had before.

When the door opened at last, it was Father who stood there, a faceless silhouette in the afternoon sun that streamed through Mother's casement. He didn't say anything. He looked like a very old man, hunched and weary.

At once I felt as if I had swallowed a great chunk of emptiness. I whispered, "Mother!" and made for the space between Father and the doorframe, thinking to dart through and satisfy myself that my fears were unfounded. But he stopped me, of course. He took me firmly by the arm and closed the door behind him. He


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stood only a moment in the dark hallway. He never even looked at Harry and me. He simply turned his back and walked down the stairs.

On the day of Mother's funeral, I at first refused to wear the black dress that Aunt Henrietta purchased for me. Standing in my undershirt and bloomers, I tensed every muscle in my face and neck until my whole head shook and my eyes felt as if they would pop from my skull. "I won't! I want the red one with the flowers! Mother wants it that way!"

At first, Aunt Henrietta tried to reason with me. "Your mother had a good sense of what was proper. She'd have wanted you to show your sorrow."

"She hates black. You can't make me wear it!"

Henrietta had a gift for the deep stab and twist. She narrowed her eyes and said, "You had better come to terms with this, child. Your mother doesn't want anything. Neither does she hate anything. She is dead, and beyond caring about you or anybody else."

At which point I threw myself on the floor and kicked and screamed until Aunt Henrietta finally got a shoehorn and raised welts on my bare backside with it. No one had ever actually beaten me before, and the whole experience left me so frightened and bewildered that I climbed into the black dress without another word. I tried to tell Father about it, but he had commenced drinking heavily on the day of Mother's death, and didn't seem very concerned about my problems.

That night, after we had been put to bed, Harry crept into my room. I lay on the wide casement bench, unable to sit without great discomfort, and Harry huddled beside me. The moon was almost full. Its silver light frosted the hills and spilled through the window onto our hands and faces.

"Shall we run away?" said Harry.

"How silly. We'd starve to death."

"But we can't stay here. She'll kill us."

I stared gloomily out at the moon, wondering if perhaps Harry had a point. What happened next I would have been inclined to pass off as a dream, only Harry saw it, too. Far off, above a distant wood, something large, and shining appeared in the chilly sky, as if from nowhere. It took me a moment to recognize it as a balloon. I strained to make out what color it was, or to discern a familiar pattern of stars around its middle, but in that light I could be sure of nothing. We watched it drift for a minute or two, like a great steel ball somehow set free of gravity. Then it vanished. A prickle of fear and excitement ran through me. Harry and I exchanged one of those looks that signals a complex, shared thought — in this case, the memory of a summer fire guttering from an impossible, cold wind. *I owe you a great debt.*



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*If there is ever any way in which I can repay it, you must tell me.*

"Clotaire!" we whispered in unison.

We spent the night beside the open window, dozing by turns so that we would not miss Clotaire's balloon if it reappeared. After a time, the moon set, and the night grew dark and close, with only a sprinkling of stars to light it. Though I fought sleep, I must have drifted off anyway sometime in the small hours after midnight, for I awakened at dawn to Harry's urgent whispers and his tugging at my shoulder.

"It's him! It's him! Look, there's the balloon."

I rubbed my eyes and looked out across a windless autumn morning. The half-light robbed everything of color. The hills, the woods, the field lay cold and gray. A few birds twittered their morning songs. The sweet reek of neglected pomace in someone's cider press drifted up to us, mingled with the faint smell of leaf smoke. And there, splendid in the faded sky, hung the silver balloon. Blinking, I climbed up on the window ledge and waved wildly, shouting, "Clotaire! Wait, Clotaire."

When I felt certain that he had seen me, I turned and bolted out the door and down the stairs. Harry ran after me, his bare feet slapping the polished wooden floors. We stood on the lawn in our nightshirts, waving and calling until the wicker basket touched ground and Clotaire stood before us.

"Hello, my friends," he said softly.

I looked into his face as steadily as I could, straightened my back, and said, "Sir, you made us a promise once."

He nodded, and smiled a smile so faint that I could hardly be sure it was there.

"We want you to take someone..."

I was cut off by a shout from one of the upstairs windows. "Catherine! Harry! You shall be thrashed within an inch of your lives for this."

"I don't give a hoot!" shouted Harry, turning toward the house with his jaw thrust out and his hands on his little-boy hips.

I squeezed my eyes shut until I saw stars. "I *said,* we want you to take someone away. To that last world ... where the children are cruel and strong. Please!" I opened my eyes. "Take her away forever."

The sun had just broken over the horizon, and light flowed over Clotaire like a torrent of melted copper. His leather puttees, his sturdy breeches, his scarf, his hair, and even his beautiful face—all of him looked strong and hard as metal in that peculiar dawn.

He gazed down at us and said, "Be certain."

"We're certain!" we chorused.

Unspeaking, Clotaire went to the


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wicker basket, opened a small wooden box, and took out a pistol. My mouth went dry. "What's that for?" I heard myself squeak.

Instead of answering, Clotaire grabbed me and held the pistol to my head. I fancied cold fingers closing around my heart. *I shall die,* I remember thinking. *And I shall probably go to hell.*

Aunt Henrietta burst from the front door of the house, her dressing gown flapping at her heels, and her hair flying. "Save me," I prayed. "Oh, Aunt Henrietta, save me!" as the muzzle of Clotaire's gun grew warm from the heat of my temple.

"How dare you!" she cried at first. Then she saw the pistol, and her eyebrows shot up, and she covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, dear Lord," she said.

"Do as I say and the child will not be hurt," said Clotaire. "Get into the basket."

"Help!" croaked Harry. "Oh, Father, help us." But Father lay drunk asleep in the far side of the house.

Aunt Henrietta climbed awkwardly over the wicker rim. "Sir, I beg of you, don't harm the children."

"Clotaire ... I changed my mind. It's all right. You don't have to take her away." I was sobbing by then.

But Clotaire only laughed, a sound as hard and sharp-edged as glass. "You have made your bargain, my friend. It is past changing now."

He loosened his grip, gave me a small push in Harry's direction, and aimed the pistol at Aunt Henrietta. I doubt that I have ever felt so confused and powerless as I did then, watching Clotaire climb into the basket himself. Everything seemed wrong. I wanted him to take her away, and yet the execution of the act frightened me as nothing had ever frightened me before. I waited for a flood of satisfaction and release, but none came. Perhaps I had, on that distant autumn morning, my first glimmering of a difficult, grown-up fact. Outside of fairy tales, real justice is a quite elusive commodity.

"You had better keep quite still, *Madame,*" said Clotaire as he prepared to fire the burner.

"Where are you taking me?" whimpered Aunt Henrietta, her face the color of smoke.

Clotaire laughed, more musically this time, and said, "A place far away but nearby, where things are not so very different. A place where you have no counterpart, never have had, and never will."

Then the burner roared. Flames erupted from it, and the silver balloon strained at its mooring. Aunt Henrietta, wild-eyed, clutched the rim of the basket. Clotaire shouted, "Heaven keep you, my friends." He pulled out the anchor line, and they rose—up, up, until at last, when they were smaller even than the sun, they vanished.

Harry and I stood on the lawn in



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shocked silence. The smells of autumn leaves and fermenting apples washed over us as the birds began to twitter again.

Though sixty years have passed since then, that morning still looms in my mind like a shadow that crosses a field and changes the look of the ground in its path. Though I've led a fine life and don't hold much with wishful thinking, I can't help wondering about the other worlds. Which one would I live in today if Clotaire had said no to us; which one if Aunt Henrietta had not vanished in a balloon?

As things turned out, Father sent Harry and me away to separate schools after Henrietta's disappearance, probably because he thought it would be easier to drink himself into an early grave if there were no children hanging about. He was dead before my twentieth birthday. Harry's gone now, too. He died last year from a heart ailment he never knew he had. As for me, I am left to carry on alone, since I never married. Though suitors courted aplenty in my youth, none of them had what I was looking for—a certain unthinking impartiality, the ability to stand outside life's complications and laugh at them.

You see, I never saw Clotaire again after that fateful morning. He disappeared with even more elegance than a puff of smoke. Sometimes, sitting here on the porch, remembering the old days, I long for one more glimpse of those robin's-egg eyes set so perfectly in that strong, tan face. I long to tell him that I understand things better now, understand about all the drunken Fathers, and all the Henriettas, and all the children who would be so fierce without them. In the best of all possible worlds, I would die with the scents of lightning and peppermint in this tired old nose. So I keep watch, and hope for one last look at Clotaire's balloon.

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*Robert Young's new story is about a woman from the future who suffers a strange incarceration and about the man who aims to set her free.*

# Glass Houses

BY
**ROBERT F. YOUNG**

She is standing in her window waiting for me. She waits for me every night when I come on guard. She knows my post as well as I do — knows exactly when I will appear around the curvature of the force field. We are would-be lovers, she and I, thwarted by time and electronic sorcery.

In the lights that the army installed around the Time Colony, we can see each other as well as though it were day. She smiles at me as I gaze up at her through the invisible field. Marianne. Her face is that of a beautiful woman and simultaneously that of a child. She has just combed her bright yellow hair. Her negligee is pink, but not much more so than the flesh it tries to conceal.

The field acts as a sound barrier, too, but we have learned to read each other's lips. With hers, she forms the words *I love you, Wayne.* I form the words *I love you, too* with mine.

Who would dream that love could come to a sentry while he walked his post? Who would dream he could awaken love in a girl from the future who had come back to the past?

I ask the oft-repeated question: *Marianne, have you found a way?* She answers: *No, but I will soon.*

*I want to take you in my arms. I want to kiss your hair.*

*I want you to.*

*So somehow you must escape.*

*Only with a disseminator can I burn through the field, and a disseminator is difficult to obtain.*

*Why are you imprisoned in the past?*

*I told you before, it does not matter why.*

*You must escape, Marianne. I cannot live without you.*



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*I will, I will, I will.*

I continue on my way. At unexpected times, the corporal of the guard makes his rounds, and I do not want him to catch me talking to Marianne. I walk to where the next post begins. The sentry who has it has moved out of sight beyond the curvature of the field. I would be able to see him, but the colonists' houses are in the way. I am grateful for the conformation of the colony, for it has enabled me to keep my trysts with Marianne a secret from the other guards.

I unsling my rifle and rest for a while before starting back. It is a warm August night. I cannot see the stars because of the mercury-vapor lights, but I know that they are out. I think the moon has set. I resling my rifle and start back. It is unnecessary baggage. It is meant to discourage people from coming too close to the field, but the colony is out of bounds by night and no one ever comes near it.

Marianne disappeared from the window when I left. Now she reappears. *I have thought of you all day,* she "says."

*And I have thought of you.*

*There must be other women in your life besides me.*

*There are none anymore.*

*I find that hard to believe.*

*It is true. But with you, there must be other men.*

*The men I know, compared to you, are dead leaves blowing in the wind.*

We converse at intervals the whole night through. We do so every night when I am on guard. At 6:30, we say good night; at 7:00, I am relieved. She must be sound asleep by now. Perhaps she is dreaming of me.

I know that I shall dream of her.

I do not like the army, but it has proved to be a blessing in disguise, for if I had not enlisted, I would never have found Marianne.

No doubt I would have come to see the Time Colony and would have stood with the other sightseers staring at the people and the houses beyond the field. But I would not have seen Marianne. Even if she had come to her window, I would not have seen her, for sightseers are not allowed to go close to the field. Then, too, the colony has many windows, and during the day many people from the future look through them into the past. With so many faces and standing so far away, I would never have been able to isolate Marianne's.

The first time I went on duty at night, I had the eleven-to-seven shift. For a while all the windows were empty, then Marianne stepped into hers. I looked up at her and she looked down at me. After that, I made sure I got the same post again each time I went on guard at night. The other guys did not care which section of the field they patrolled. They did



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not know about Marianne. Soon she and I learned to read each other's lips. Soon we fell in love.

I asked the lieutenant who is in charge of our contingent if I could have the eleven-to-seven shift right along. He looked at me as though he thought I were crazy. Then he shrugged and said it was all right with him. I was tempted to ask him if I could dispense with my nights off, but I did not think it would be wise. I always tell Marianne ahead of time when someone else will be walking my post. I know she does not appear in her window on those nights, for whenever one of the other guys sees an attractive woman, he raves about it for days.

When the Time Colony first appeared, there was a national alert, and the army at once put it out of bounds. Only after it became certain that it posed no danger and that the force field enclosing it threw forth no harmful radiation was the restriction lifted. Thousands of people began coming to view the phenomenon, people from all over the world, and the nearby town of Weberville began growing fat and rich. Only a contingent of troops guards the field now, but in the beginning our whole company was involved. But interest waned, and there really was not much of anything to see, since the colony, despite the field enclosing it, does not look markedly different from an ordinary village. People, in fact, have even begun referring to it as such. It it is indeed a village, it is a dead one, for the people in it do not work. All they do is go for leisurely walks, or sit for hours in the "village" park. The only real activity they ever engage in is a game much like croquet that they sometimes play in their backyards. Their houses are as uninteresting as they are. The structures are modular, but in appearance do not differ greatly from most modern two-story dwellings. Nevertheless, in two respects the colony, when thought of as a village, is unique: it contains no children, and all of the "villagers" are beautiful.

My "villager" is the most beautiful one of all.

*Marianne, you must hurry and find a way.*

*The only way is with a disseminator.*

*Get one now.*

*I cannot. They are for emergency use only and are under lock and key. But I wil get the key, Wayne — I will, I will, I will.*

*Who has it? Your jailer?*

*There is no jailer. We are not truly imprisoned, but it is against the rules for any of us to leave.*

*Why should it be against the rules?*

*It is not necessary for you to know.*

*I want you, Marianne.*



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*I want you, too.*

*I cannot wait to hold you in my arms.*

*I will get the key, Wayne — I will, I will, I will.*

A letter from my mother. Everything is fine back home. Dad sends his love. P.S.: Jennifer got married.

Jennifer?

Oh, yes — the girl I used to go with. I had almost forgotten her name.

*Marianne, did you get the key?*

*Yes. I have it hidden away.*

*If you have the key, then get the disseminator now.*

*I cannot get it till tomorrow, because at night there is a guard. Oh, Wayne, I am so afraid.*

*You do not have to be afraid. Once you are free, I will take care of you.*

*But your world is so different from mine.*

*You will be happy in it. I will make you happy.*

*Where will you take me?*

*I will find a place for you in town. We will live there together. I will marry you.*

*You do not have to marry me.*

*I do not have to, but I will.*

*How will I get to town?*

*I will take you there. After you break free.*

*Oh, Wayne I am so afraid.*

• • •

In the beginning, the people who are from the future were thought to be from the stars. The learned men who put their heads together concluded that the colony had been transmitted to Earth by an alien race whose technology was so advanced that ours, when compared to it, was still in the Tinkertoy stage. But when closer scrutiny revealed that the colonists are exactly like us, another answer had to be found, for the odds against two identical life-forms existing on two different worlds are astronomical. Nevertheless, it was a long time before the learned men finally faced the fact that since the colony could not conceivably have come from the stars, and since matter transmission is as far beyond the Russians' ken as it is beyond ours, the colony must have been sent back from the future.

Why had it been sent back? Certainly not so the people in it could study the past, for they never emerged from their electronic cocoon, and although they often looked through its invisible walls at the surrounding countryside, the expressions on their faces indicated that they did so out of boredom rather than scientific curiosity.

Attempts were made to contact them, but they ignored the learned men who sought entrance at their "door." Attempts were made to short-circuit the field, but it proved to be as far beyond the grasp of present-day electronics experts as quantum



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mechanics would be to a five-year-old child.

It is said that the term *nuclear bomb* passed through some of the learned minds and even escaped some of the learned lips. I find this hard to believe.

Why don't they talk to us? one anchorman bewailed. Think of all the wonderful things they could tell us! Think how easily they could solve the problems that beset us every day!

Sometimes the colony makes me think of a huge bathysphere that has been dropped deep into the sea of time. The people in it are looking out at fish swimming around them in the sea. Marianne saw a fish she liked, and the fish is me.

I go into town and rent a small apartment. I return to camp and try to fall asleep. I cannot. That evening I sit on my bunk and smoke too many cigarettes. At quarter of eleven, the other guards and I are driven to the colony in the personnel carrier. Marianne is in her window waiting for me. She says yes when I ask her if she has the disseminator. I tell her she must wait till almost dawn before she burns through the field. She is in negligee, and I tell her the sooner she gets dressed, the better. Next time I stop before her window, she has a short blue dress on. It is different from the dresses present-day women wear, but not radically so. You must pack, I tell her my next time by. She nods. Perhaps she already has. Throughout the night, she keeps telling me she is afraid, and I keep telling her not to be. When the sky in the east begins to brighten, I tell her there is no need to wait any longer, and she disappears from the window.

She reappears a few moments later, hurrying around the house. She is carrying a suitcase in one hand and a small object in the other. Kneeling close to the field, she points the object toward it. There is a lance of white light. It turns the section of the field directly before her a fiery blue. Blue flames leap up; there is an acrid smell. Then a hole appears in the field. She drops the object and leaps through the hole with her suitcase. The hole closes behind her. In a moment she is in my arms, soft, sweet-scented, taller than I thought she would be. I kiss her greedily, and she kisses me back no less greedily. At length I force myself to pull away. I point to a small stand of locusts about a hundred feet from the field. "Over there. You must hide. I'll come for you as soon as I'm relieved."

"Oh, Wayne, I'm so scared!"

I kiss her cheek. "Don't be, Marianne. Everything will be fine."

She hurries toward the trees. Presently the darkness beyond the range of the lights hides her from sight.

It is impossible for me to go to her immediately after I am relieved. I have to return to camp with the oth-



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er guards and get rid of my rifle first. Hurriedly I shave and shower and get into a clean uniform. At the gate, I call a cab. I have the driver take me back to the colony. I get out on the highway and cut across the fields to the stand of locusts. Marianne is lying in a fetal position at the foot of one of the trees. Her suitcase is lying beside her. I seize her shoulders and shake her. "Marianne!"

I pull her to her feet, and she clings to me as though a gale wind were blowing and she is afraid it will tear her away. She is trembling. "Marianne, will they come looking for you?"

"I do not think they will dare to."

I lead her back across the fields to the highway. I did not tell the cab driver to wait, because I feared he might guess the truth. We walk the short distance to town. I lead Marianne up the stairs to our apartment. At once, we make love.

After we are through, she lies beside me on the bed, breathing softly. Although she looks like a little girl, she did not make love like one. Her flesh is roseate. Compared to it, my flesh is like that of an old man. "Is this where we are going to live together?" she asks.

"For now. In six months, I'll be discharged. Then I'm going to take you home."

"I thought you were going to ... marry me."

"I am going to. But as yet I don't even know your last name."

"I have none."

"We'll make one up." I look at my watch. It is nearly noon. "Let's go have lunch somewhere."

"I can't. I tore my dress in the woods."

"Put another one on."

"I don't have another."

"But your suitcase — you must have one in there."

"No. I didn't bring one."

"Well, what did you bring?"

"It's not important."

"Well, put your dress back on. We'll go buy you another."

She picks out a cotton and polyester one. I wanted to buy her something better, but she insists it is all she needs. It does not need altering, and we return to our apartment, where she puts it on. Then we go to a small restaurant for lunch. Her table manners are quaint. Probably if I were to go back to ancient Sumer, mine would seem quaint, too.

We make love all afternoon. In the evening, we again go out to eat. Then we make love again. I am exhausted when I go back to camp to go on duty.

During the night, I look often into the colony. All seems as calm as before. Perhaps Marianne's absence has not been discovered yet. If it has been, it has given rise to no excitement.



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The hours drag by. I am glad when at last I am relieved. After a shower and a shave and a change of clothes, I go immediately into town. Marianne seems to have sensed my coming, for she is lying in bed with the covers thrown back, waiting to make love.

That afternoon, after I have slept part of the day away, I ask her about the future. "The world you come from, Marianne — what's it like?"

She smiles and says, "Could you tell someone who lived thousands of years before your time what the late twentieth century is like?"

"It would be difficult."

"It would be impossible."

"What century are you from?"

"The date would mean nothing to you, since the Gregorian calendar is no longer in use."

"Then tell me how many years separate your time and mine."

"Enough of them so that I had to learn to speak English all over again when we were learning to read each other's lips."

"Twenty thousand?"

"No. Not quite.... If we keep talking about the future, we may lose track of the present."

"Only one more question, then. How long will the colony be here?"

"There are no plans to take it back."

"Why was it sent back in time?"

"You said only one question."

"All right. The subject is dropped."

After all, why should I care why she is here? The fact that she *is* here is all that counts.

Despite her objections, I buy her another dress and a new pair of shoes and new underthings. I also buy her a toothbrush and a comb and a brush. Although she brought her suitcase, she seems to have brought nothing in it.

It becomes known in camp that I am shacking up. Some of the guys saw Marianne and me together in a restaurant, and they keep asking me where I came up with such a dish. I introduce my buddy Steve to her one evening when he is doing the town. She is wearing the new dress I bought her. It is white and has a low neckline, and she looks as though she stepped out of a TV screen. Steve is awed. "I didn't think they made them like that anymore!"

There is a man standing in Marianne's window!

I pretend I did not see him, and do not slow my pace. But I know he is looking at me.

The window is empty when I retrace my steps. Perhaps he only glanced through it out of idle curiosity.

But what is he doing in Marianne's house?

"Marianne, in the colony, did you live with someone?"



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"... No."

"There's someone staying in your house. I saw him looking through your window."

"... Perhaps someone else moved in."

The slanted morning sunlight is full upon her face. It is the face of an innocent little girl. She is lying there in our bed waiting to make love. I cast the man from my thoughts.

That night he is standing in her window again. I try to cast him from my thoughts again, but he will not go away.

The next night, when I am getting ready to go on guard, Steven asks if I will change nights-off with him. He will take my place tonight if I will take his tomorrow night. He had a heavy date lined up. This is fine with me. Tonight the man in the window can watch him. After we make arrangements with the corporal of the guard, I return to town.

The word *Surprise!* is on my lips as I enter Marianne's and my apartment and walk across the little living room to the bedroom, but the word does not leave my lips. She is lying in bed with the bed light on, and her suitcase is positioned beside her. It is open, revealing the metallic control panel of some manner of machine. Wires issuing from the base of the panel are attached by electrodes to her forehead, her neck, her chest, her stomach, her arms and legs. It is as though she were taking an EKG.

When she sees me, she tears the wires away. They retract themselves, and she sits up in bed and quickly closes the suitcase and lowers it to the floor. She looks like a little girl who has been caught with her hand in a cookie jar, but she recovers quickly and holds out her arms to me. As always, I am unable to resist them.

"I thought," she says, after we have made love, "that you were supposed to go on guard."

I tell her that Steve and I changed off. She does not mention the suitcase. I do not, either. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

The next afternoon, shortly after we have returned from lunch, someone begins knocking on our door. "Don't answer!" Marianne says. I see that her face has gone pale. "Why not?" I ask. "It may be Steve." She runs into the bedroom and closes the door.

It is not Steve. It is the man I saw in her window. Despite the August heat, he is wearing a blue pastel suit. Its styling is subtly different from that of suits I am familiar with. He has blond hair and his eyes are as blue as Marianne's. He is built like a Greek god and is at least a foot taller than I am.

He stands in the doorway and looks into the room. He says something, only one word of which I can understand. "Marianne."



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"I don't think she wants to see you."

He says something else that I do not understand. He not only looks like a Greek god, he talks like one. He steps into the room, pushing me aside. He sees the closed bedroom door and starts toward it. I do not know what to do. He opens the door, and Marianne screams. "Wayne, make him go away!"

I reach up and seize his shoulder, and he turns toward me. Again he says something I do not understand, then he turns his back on me and starts to step into the bedroom. I seize one of his arms with both hands and try to pull him away from the doorway. I do not expect to be able to, he is so huge, but to my astonishment, he backs up several paces and almost loses his balance. I pull harder on his arm, and this time he does lose his balance and crashes to the floor. I have to let go his arm, and now I stand there watching him. He rolls over onto his stomach, gets up on one knee, struggles to his feet. There is terror in his blue eyes. I push him into the hallway, and he almost falls again. I slam the door. I hear his footsteps as he hurries toward the stairs.

I go into the bedroom. "Marianne, he's gone."

She has assumed a fetal position on the bed. I sit down beside her. "He's gone," I say again.

Slowly, she straightens out her legs, then turns on her back. Color comes back into her cheeks. "He was your lover, wasn't he?" I say.

"In — in a way."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I — I was afraid."

"You shouldn't have been. I would have understood."

"I don't think you understand now."

*Yes, I do, Marianne.*

"He — he won't come back?"

"I don't think so. When I'm not here, just lock the door."

"He may break it down."

I laugh. "He won't break it down."

"You're not mad, Wayne?"

"No."

She holds out her arms to me. "Let's make love."

"Not right now. I'm tired."

"Later on?"

"We'll see."

They play croquetlike games in their backyards and they go for walks in the therapeutic sunlight and they sit in the park and talk, these beautiful people from tomorrow. They were unable to bring their golf courses with them, but I am sure they brought their TVs.

When Marianne is taking her morning shower, I place her suitcase on the bed and raise the lid and look at the control panel. There are a number of recessed dials and a switch by which the machine can be turned on



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and off. I know there must be batteries somewhere. At length I find the hidden receptacle that encloses them, and I remove them and recover the receptacle. They are like no batteries I have ever seen before. They are so tiny they do not even make a bulge in my shirt pocket. I close the suitcase and shove it back under the bed.

During the days that follow, I watch my true love grow old.

She does not know the batteries are gone. Probably she never knew the machine needed batteries in order to run. When I walk my post, I picture her lying in bed with the suitcase beside her, its dead wires attached to her like a web.

Age comes into her eyes first. I watch their blueness pale. I see them settle deeper and deeper into her skull. I marvel at the concavity of her temples. I pity the shuffling way she begins to walk.

I am not a monster. I put the batteries back in.

Youth blooms again, and my atrophied truelove turns back into a rose. The concupiscence that my real youth awakened reappears in her eyes. But I am unable any longer to assuage it.

"You know, don't you," she says to me one morning.

I nod. I go into the bedroom and get her suitcase. "Can you get back in?"

Her young-old eyes will not look into mine. "Yes. He'll let me in."

I call a cab. On the way to the colony, I ask, "Is there no room for you in your own time?"

"No. There are too many of us. It had to be the past or euthanasia."

"There must be other colonies."

"There are many. Each is a century apart." She shudders. "I do not wish to grow old. I do not wish to die."

"No one does."

There are not many sightseers looking at the colony. After we get out of the cab, I lead the way around the field till we can see her window. I time our approach to coincide with the moment when both of the nearest guards will be hidden by the curvature. Her "lover" has been watching us through her window. He disappears and a few moments later comes hurrying around the house. He has a disseminator in his hand. He burns a hole in the field, and she runs through it with her suitcase. He takes her suitcase, and they embrace, and then, arm in arm, they walk back around the house.

This afternoon they will probably play "croquet" in their backyard. Later on, they will no doubt go for a walk. Perhaps they will sit for a while in the park and chat with their acquaintances. This evening they will watch TV. The future equivalent thereof. Programs beamed back from the future, actors who have not as yet been born. Sitting before the screen,



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perhaps they will hold hands. They will pretend that the youth that left them long ago still resides in their rejuvenated flesh. After a while they will go to bed, but they will not make love, because even in the future, old men, despite their beauty, are still old men.

All of the houses in the colony are made of glass, but I do not dare to cast a stone.

Although it is reinforced glass, all of the houses will eventually come tumbling down.

One of the guards rounds the curvature of the field. I wave to him and he waves back. No doubt he wonders what I am doing so close to the field. Before it occurs to him that he should challenge me, I turn and walk away.

Tonight is my night off. I will find a bar somewhere where young people drink and dance and revel in their youth, and I will join them and revel in mine. And if we keep reveling long enough and loudly enough and are careful not to throw stones, perhaps our own glass houses will never come tumbling down.


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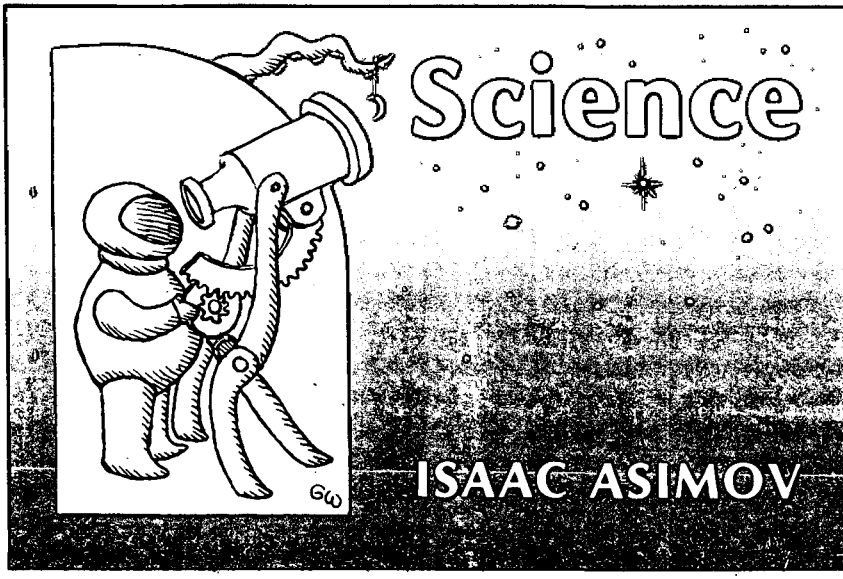


*Drawing by Gahan Wilson*

## FAR AS HUMAN EYE COULD SEE

I received a communication from a tax-gathering department the other day, and such communications are marked by two unfailing characteristics. First, they are tremble-inducing (what are they after? What have I done wrong?). Second, they are written in High Martian. It is simply impossible to interpret what they are saying.

As nearly as I could make out, something was wrong with one of my minor taxes of 1979. I had underpaid by $300 and was being soaked that, plus $122 in interest, and so the total came to $422. Somewhere among the rank and sprouting verbiage there was a collection of words that sounded like the threat of being strung up by one big toe for twenty years if I didn't pay in five minutes.

I called my accountant who, as always, was utterly calm at this threat to someone else's existence. "Send it to me," he said, stifling a yawn. "I'll look at it."

"I think," I said, nervously, "I had better pay it first."

"If you wish," he said, "since you can afford it."

So I did. I wrote out the check, put it in an envelope, and sprinted to


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the post office to make the deadline and save my big toe.

Then I took the document to my accountant who used his special accountant's magnifying glass to study the small print. Finally, he was ready with his diagnosis.

He said, "They're telling you *they* owe *you* money."

"Then why are they charging me interest?"

"That's the interest *they* owe *you*.."

"But they threaten me if I don't pay."

"I know, but tax collecting is a dull job and you can't blame them for trying to inject a little harmless fun into it."

"But I paid them already."

"It doesn't matter. I will simply write to them and explain that they terrorized an honest citizen, and they will eventually send you a check for $844, covering their debt to you, plus your unnecessary payment." Then he added, with a jovial smile, "But don't hold your breath."

That gave me my opportunity for the last word. "A person who deals with publishers," I said, austerely, "is accustomed to not holding his breath for payment."*

And now, having established my credentials as a keen-eyed, farseeing individual, let us do a little keen-eyed farseeing.

Suppose I dip into the future far as human eye could see (to coin a phrase Alfy Tennyson once used). If I do that, what will I see happening to Earth? Let us assume, to begin with, that Earth is alone in the Universe, albeit with its present age and structure.

Naturally, if it is alone in the Universe, there is no Sun to light and warm it, so its surface is dark and at a temperature near absolute zero. It is, in consequence, lifeless.

Its interior, however, is hot because of the kinetic energy of the smaller bodies that coalesced to form it 4.6 eons ago (where an "eon" is taken to be 1,000,000,000 — one billion — years). The inner heat would escape only slowly through the insulating rock of its crust and, besides, would be continually renewed by the breakdown of such radioactive constituents of Earthly matter as uranium-238, uranium-235, thorium-232, potassium-40 and so on. (Of these, uranium-238 contrib-

**Actually, the tax people sent me back my check within ten days, saying they had no right to it.*



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utes about 90 percent of the heat.)

We might assume, then, that Earth, alone in the Universe, would endure in perpetuity in its condition of cold outside and hot inside. The uranium-238, however, slowly decays, with a half-life of 4.5 eons. As a result, half of the original supply has already disappeared, and half of what remains will disappear in the next 4.5 eons, and so on. In about 30 eons from now, the uranium-238 remaining on Earth will be only about 1 percent of the present content.

We may expect, then, that with time, the Earth's internal heat will leak away and will be less and less efficiently replaced by the shrinking supply of radioactive materials. By the time the Earth is 30 eons older than it is now, it will be merely luke-warm inside. It would continue to lose heat (at a slower and slower rate) for an indefinite period, getting ever closer to absolute zero, and, of course, never quite reaching it.

But the Earth is not the only body in existence. In our Solar system alone, there are countless other objects of planetary and sub-planetary size, from mighty Jupiter down to tiny dust particles and even down to individual atoms and subatomic particles. There might be similar collections of such non-luminous objects circling other stars, to say nothing of such objects wandering through the interstellar spaces of our Galaxy. Suppose, then, that the entire Galaxy was made up of such non-luminous objects only. What would be their ultimate fate?

The larger the body, the higher the internal temperature and the greater the internal heat gathered together in the process of formation; and, in consequence the longer the time it would take to cool off. My rough guess is that Jupiter, with a little over 300 times the mass of the Earth, would take at least a thousand times as long to cool as Earth would — say, 30,000 eons.

In the course of this vast length of time, however (two thousand times the present age of the Universe) other things would happen that would outweigh the mere process of cooling off. There would be collisions between the bodies. In the periods of time we're used to, such collisions would not be common, but over the space of 30,000 eons, there would be very many. Some collisions would result in breakups and disintegrations into still smaller bodies. Where a small body collides with a much larger one, however, the smaller body is trapped by the larger and remains with it. Thus, Earth sweeps up trillions of meteorites


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and micrometeorites each day, and its mass slowly, but steadily, increases as a result.

We may consider it a general rule, in fact, that as a result of collisions, large bodies grow at the expense of small bodies so that, with time, small bodies tend to grow rare, while large bodies grow ever larger.

Each collision that adds to the mass of a larger body also adds kinetic energy that is converted into heat, so that the cooling off rate of the larger body is further slowed down. In fact, particularly large bodies, which are especially effective in gathering up smaller ones, would gain energy at a rate that will cause them to warm up rather than cool down. This higher temperature, plus the greater central pressures that come with increasing mass, will eventually (when the body is at least ten times the mass of Jupiter) bring about nuclear reactions at the center. The body will undergo "nuclear ignition," in other words, and its overall temperature will rise even higher until, finally, the surface grows faintly luminous. The planet will have become a feeble star.

One can then imagine our Galaxy as consisting of planetary and sub-planetary non-luminous bodies which gradually develop, here and there, into faint specks of light. It is useless to do so, however, because in actual fact, the Galaxy, in forming, condensed into bodies massive enough to undergo nuclear ignition to begin with. It consists of as many as 300 billion stars, many of them quite brilliant and a few of them thousands of times as luminous as our Sun.

What we must ask, then, is what will become of the stars, for their fate will far outweigh anything that will happen to the smaller non-luminous bodies that, for the most part, circle in orbit about the various stars.

Non-luminous bodies can exist without serious change (except for the cooling process, and occasional collision) for indefinite periods, because their atom structure resists the inward pull of gravity. The stars, however, are in a different situation.

Stars, being far more massive than planets, have far more intense gravitational fields and their atomic structure smashes under the inward pull of those fields. As a result, stars, on formation, would at once shrink to planetary size and gain enormous densities, if gravity were all that need be taken into account. However, the vast temperatures and pres-



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sures at the center of such massive objects results in nuclear ignition, and the heat, developed by the nuclear reactions at the core, succeeds in keeping the stars' volumes expanded even against the pull of their enormous gravities.

The heat of stars, however, is developed at the expense of nuclear fusion that converts hydrogen to helium, and, eventually, to more complicated nuclei still. Since there is a finite amount of hydrogen in any star, the nuclear reactions can only continue for so long. Sooner or later, as the content of nuclear fuel diminishes, there is a gradual failure of the ability of nuclear-developed heat to keep stars expanded against the inexorable and forever continuing inward pull of gravity.

Stars no more massive than our Sun eventually consume enough of their fuel to be forced to undergo a rather quiet gravitational collapse. They contract to "white dwarfs" the size of Earth or less (though retaining virtually all their original mass). White dwarfs consist of shattered atoms, but the free electrons resist compression through their mutual repulsion, so that a white dwarf, left to itself, will remain unchanged in structure for indefinite periods.

Stars that are more massive than the Sun undergo more drastic changes. The more massive they are, the more violent the events. Beyond a certain mass, they will explode into "supernovas" that are capable of radiating, for a brief period, as much energy as a hundred billion ordinary stars. Part of the mass of the exploding star is blown off into space, and what is left can collapse into a "neutron star." To form a neutron star, the force of collapse must break through the electron sea that would maintain it in the form of a white dwarf. The electrons are driven into combination with atomic nuclei, producing neutrons which, lacking electrical charge, do not repel each other but are forced together into contact.

Neutrons are so tiny, even compared to atoms, that the entire mass of the Sun could be squeezed into a sphere no more than 14 kilometres in diameter. The neutrons themselves resist breakdown, so that a neutron star, left to itself, will remain unchanged in structure for indefinite periods.

If the star is particularly massive, the collapse will be so catastrophic that even neutrons will not be able to resist the inpulling effect of gravity, and the star will collapse past the neutron stage. Past that there is nothing to prevent the star from collapsing indefinitely toward zero volume and infinite density and a "black hole" is formed.


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The amount of time it takes a star to use up its fuel to the point of collapse varies with the mass of the star. The larger the mass, the more quickly its fuel is used up. The largest stars will maintain an extended volume for only a million years, or even less, before collapsing. Stars the size of Sun will remain extended for perhaps 10 to 12 billion years before collapsing. The least massive red dwarfs may shine up to 200 billion years before the inevitable.

Most stars of our Galaxy were formed not long after the Big Bang some 15 billion years ago, but a scattering of new stars (including our own Sun) have been forming steadily ever since. Some are forming now, and others will continue to form for billions of years to come. The new stars that will form out of dust clouds are, however, limited in number. The dust clouds of our Galaxy amount to only 10 percent of its total mass so that 90 percent of all the stars that can form have already formed.

Eventually, the new stars will also collapse, and while the occasional supernova will add to the interstellar dust, the time will come when no new stars can form. All the mass of our Galaxy will have been collected into stars that will exist in collapsed form only, and in three different varieties: white dwarfs, neutron stars and black holes. In addition, there will be various non-luminous planetary and sub-planetary bodies here and there.

Black holes, left to themselves, give out no light and are as non-luminous as planets. White dwarfs and neutron stars do give off radiation, including visible light, possibly even more per unit surface than ordinary stars do. However, white dwarfs and neutron stars have such small surfaces compared to ordinary stars that the total light they emit is insignificant. A Galaxy composed of only collapsed stars and planetary bodies would therefore be essentially dark. After about 100 eons (six or seven times the present age of the Galaxy) there would be only insignificant sparks of radiation to relieve the cold and darkness that would have fallen everywhere.

What's more, what specks of light do exist will slowly diminish and vanish. White dwarfs will slowly dim and become black dwarfs, Neutron stars will slow their rotations and emit weaker and weaker pluses of radiation.

These bodies, however, will not be left to themselves. They will all still make up a Galaxy. The two or three hundred billion collapsed stars will still have the shape of a spiral galaxy and will still revolve majestically about the center.



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Over the eons, there will be collisions. Collapsed stars will collide with bits of dust, gravel, even sizable planetary bodies. At long intervals, collapsed stars will even collide with each other (releasing quantities of radiation that will be large in human terms but insignificant against the dark mass of the Galaxy). In general, the tendency, in such collisions, will be for the more massive body to gain at the expense of the less massive body.

A white dwarf that gains in mass will eventually become too massive to remain one and will reach the point where it collapses suddenly into a neutron star. Similarly, a neutron star will reach the point of collapsing into a black hole. Black holes, which can collapse no further, will slowly gain in mass.

In a billion eons ($10^{18}$ years), it may be that our Galaxy will consist almost entirely of black holes of varying sizes — with a smattering of non-black-hole objects, from neutron stars down to dust, making up but a very small fraction of the total mass.

The largest black hole would be the one that was originally at the center of the Galaxy, where the mass concentration has always been the greatest. Indeed, astronomers suspect there is already a massive black hole at the Galaxy's center, one with a mass of perhaps a million Suns, and steadily growing.

The black holes making up the Galaxy in this far future will be revolving about the central black hole in orbits of varying radii and eccentricity, and two will every now and then pass each other comparatively closely. Such near misses might well allow a transfer of angular momentum, so that one black hole will gain energy and will loop farther out from the Galactic center, while the other will lose energy and will drop in closer to the center.

Little by little, the central black hole will swallow up one smaller black hole after another, as the small ones lose enough energy to approach the center too closely.

Eventually, after a billion billion eons ($10^{27}$ years), the Galaxy may consist essentially of a "Galactic black hole," surrounded by a scattering of smaller black holes that are far enough away to be virtually independent of the gravitational influence of the center.

How large would the Galactic black hole be? I have seen an estimate for its mass as a billion Suns, or 1 percent of the total mass of the Galaxy. The remaining 99 percent would be made up (almost entirely) of the small black holes.



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Yet I feel uneasy about that. I can't offer any evidence, but my instinct tells me that the Galactic black hole should be more like 100 billion Suns in mass, or half the mass of the Galaxy, while isolated black holes make up the other half.

Our Galaxy does not, however, exist in isolation. It is part of a cluster of some two dozen galaxies, called the "Local Group." Most of the members of the Local Group are considerably smaller than our Galaxy, but at least one, the Andromeda galaxy, is larger than ours.

In the $10^{27}$ years that would suffice to convert our Galaxy into a Galactic black hole surrounded by smaller ones, the other galaxies of the Local Group would each be converted into the same. Naturally, the various galactic black holes would vary in size according to the original mass of the galaxy in which they formed. The Local Group, then, would consist of two dozen or so galactic black holes, with Andromeda black hole the largest and our Milky Way black hole next.

All these galactic black holes would be revolving about the center of gravity of the Local Group, and various galactic black holes would undergo near misses with a transfer of angular momentum. Again, some would be forced far from the center of gravity and some would sink closer to it. Eventually, a Supergalactic black hole would form which might have a mass (my guess) equal to 500 billion Suns — a mass equal to about twice the mass of our own Galaxy — with smaller galactic black holes and sub-galactic black holes circling in enormous orbits about the supergalactic black hole, or actually drifting off in space, altogether independent of the Local Group. This should be a better picture of the situation after $10^{27}$ years, than the one drawn earlier from our Galaxy alone.

The Local Group is not all there is in the Universe, either. There are other clusters, perhaps as many as a billion of them, some of them large enough to include a thousand individual galaxies or more.

The Universe, however, is expanding. That is, the clusters of galaxies are receding from each other at large velocities. By the time $10^{27}$ years have passed and the Universe consists of supergalactic black holes, those individual supergalactic black holes will be receding from each other at such speeds that it is not likely they will ever interact significantly.



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What's more, the smaller black holes that will have escaped from the clusters and will be wandering about through inter-cluster space are not ever likely to encounter major black holes in the ever expanding space through which they move.

We might come to the conclusion, then, that there is not much to say of the Universe after the $10^{27}$-year mark is reached. It will consist merely of supergalactic black holes in endless recession from each other (assuming, as most astronomers now think, that we live in an "open Universe," one, that is, that will expand forever) with a scattering of smaller black holes wandering through intercluster space. And, it might seem to us, there will be no significant change other than that expansion.

If so, we would probably be wrong.

The original feeling about black holes was that they were an absolute dead end — everything in, nothing out.

It seems, however, that is not so. The English physicist Stephen William Hawking (1942- ), applying quantum mechanical considerations to black holes, showed that they could evaporate. Every black hole has the equivalent of a temperature. The smaller the mass, the higher the temperature and the faster they will evaporate.

In fact, the rate of evaporation is inversely proportional to the cube of the mass, so that if black hole A is ten times as massive as black hole B, then black hole A will take a thousand times as long to evaporate. Again, as a black hole evaporates and loses mass, it evaporates faster and faster, and when it gets to be small enough, it evaporates explosively.

The temperature of sizable black holes is within a billionth of a billionth of a degree above absolute zero so that their evaporation is dreadfully slow. Even after $10^{27}$ years, very little evaporation has yet taken place. Indeed, what evaporation does take place is overwhelmed by the absorption of matter by the black holes as they swing through space. Eventually, though, little will remain to be absorbed, and evaporation will slowly begin to dominate.

Very slowly, over eons and eons of time, the black holes shrink in size, the smaller ones shrinking faster. Then, one by one, in inverse order of size, they shrivel and pop explosively into oblivion. The really large black holes take $10^{100}$ or even $10^{110}$ years to do this.


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In evaporating, black holes produce electromagnetic radiation (photons) and neutrino/antineutrino pairs. These possess no rest-mass, but only energy (which, of course, is a form of thinly-spread-out mass).

Even if particles remain in space, they will not be permanent.

The mass of the Universe is made up almost entirely of protons and neutrons, with a minor contribution from electrons. Until recently, protons (which make up about 95 percent of the mass of the Universe right now) were thought to be completely stable, as long as they were left to themselves.

Not so, according to current theory. Apparently, protons can, very slowly, decay spontaneously into positrons, photons and neutrinos. The half-life of a proton is something like $10^{31}$ years, which is an enormous interval, but not enormous enough. By the time all the black holes have evaporated, a so much longer time has elapsed that something like 90 percent of all the protons existing in the Universe will have broken down. By the time $10^{200}$ years have passed, 99 percent of the protons will have broken down.

The neutrons, which can exist stably in association with protons, are liberated when protons break down. They are then unstable and, in the space of minutes, break down to electrons and protons. The protons then break down in their turn to positrons and massless particles.

The only particles remaining in quantity will then be electrons and positrons and in time they will collide, annihilating each other in a shower of photons.

By the time, then, that $10^{200}$ years has passed, the Universe will be a vast ball of photons, neutrinos and antineutrinos, expanding outward indefinitely. Everything will spread out more and more thinly, so that space will more and more approximate a vacuum.

One current theory, the so-called "inflationary Universe," begins with a total vacuum, one that contains not only no matter, but no radiation. Such a vacuum, according to quantum theory, can undergo random fluctuations to produce matter and antimatter in equal or nearly equal proportions. Generally, such matter/antimatter annihilatesitself almost at once. Given time enough, however, a fluctuation may take place that will produce an enormously massive quantity of matter/antimatter, with just enough unbalance to create a Universe of matter in a sea of radiation. A super-rapid expansion will then prevent annihilation and will produce a Universe large enough to accomodate galaxies.



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Perhaps, then, by the time, say $10^{500}$ years pass, the Universe will be close enough to a vacuum to allow fluctuations on a large scale to become possible again.

Then, amid the dead ashes of an old, old Universe, a totally new one may be conceived, rush outward, form galaxies and begin another long adventure. In that view (which I must admit I've made up myself and which has not been advanced by any reputable astronomer that I know of), the forever-expanding Universe is not necessarily a "one-shot" Universe.

It may be that outside our Universe (if we could reach outside to observe) there are the dregs of an enormously tenuous, enormously older Universe, that faintly encloses us; and outside that a still more tenuous, far, far older one, that encloses both; and beyond that — forever and forever without end.

But what if we live in a "closed Universe," one with a high enough density of matter in it to supply the gravitational pull required to bring the expansion to an end some day, and to begin a contraction, a falling-together, of the Universe?

The general astronomic view is that the density of matter in the Universe is only about a hundredth of the minimum quantity required to close the Universe, but what if they're wrong? What if the overall density of matter in the Universe is actually twice the critical value?

In that case, it is estimated that the Universe will expand till it is 60 eons old (four times its present age), at which time the slowing rate of expansion will have finally come to a halt. At that time, the Universe will have reached a maximum diameter of about 40 billion light-years.

The Universe will then slowly start to contract and do so faster and faster. After another 60 eons, it will pinch itself into a Big Crunch, and finally disappear into the vacuum from which it originated.

Then, after a timeless interval, another such Universe will form out of the vacuum — expand — and contract — over and over again without end. Or perhaps Universes are formed in succession, some of which are Open and some Closed in random order.

No matter how we slice it, however, if we look far enough, we can end up with a vision of Universe after Universe, in infinite numbers through eternity — far as human eye could see.



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*In which a TV writer, immersed in the absurdities of turning out a soap opera, finds his life moving in a disturbingly familiar direction...*

# *The Man Who Decided the Truth About Todd and Adriana's Baby*

BY

## GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

FIONA: And you think that's enough? You think I will let you walk away, just like that?

JEFFREY: I don't care *what* you think, my dear. I'm going into the kitchen and get myself a cup of coffee. That will give you time to think over what I've said. Don't forget, I know your little secret now. *(JEFFREY crosses to the kitchen door and pauses.)* Would you like me to bring you a cup, Fiona?

FIONA: You can go to the devil, you blackmailer!

*(JEFFREY laughs and exits.)*

Barry Levitz looked at the typewritten page and let his breath out in a long sigh. He drank from his own cup, but the coffee had become cold and bitter. He grimaced and put the cup down. He looked at the page in the typewriter; there was a long, blank, empty white space on it that he had to fill with words and deeds. He had five more pages to do, and he had to finish them in an hour, and he hated the very thought of it.

He looked across the room at one of the other writers, a young woman named Sharon Camp. She was typing away as if the Russians were on the West Side. Dialogue was pouring out of her, and the characters moved and lived and breathed on her page. Levitz remembered how it had been for him, too, once upon a time. When he had begun working for the show. When he still cared.

After a moment, Camp's torrent of typing slowed and stopped. She looked up, dazed, perhaps still immersed in the dreamlike world of the story. It was a sign of her inexperience; the characters still seemed more lifelike to her than real people. She



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identified with them. She wrote their words and actions, then watched the actors perform them, and it made her feel like some divine power. Levitz remembered that feeling, too.

"Finished?" he asked.

Sharon Camp looked at him, startled. "Oh, yeah," she said. She rolled the page out of her machine. "This was the big confrontation between FIONA and ADRIANA. It was really something. My heart's still pounding."

"Uh huh. Well, when your heart settles down, would you like to go get a cup of coffee? I want to get out of here for a few minutes. I've got to clear my mind."

"Sure, Barry. Let me just make a note to myself about what I want to do next." She looked at an open notebook, crossed off a few lines, then scribbled in a hint or two about the way the next scene should work. Then she threw down her pencil and stretched out her arms. Her expression was triumphant; it made Barry sick. She was so pleased with herself, as if she were actually accomplishing something worthwhile. He decided she was too fresh and naive for him to meddle with; he'd let her enjoy herself. He wouldn't burst her bubble, as his own had been burst. He would let the job itself perform that essential cruelty.

They went downstairs to the commissary. Camp did most of the talking. "At first, I couldn't figure out what they could possibly say to each other. I mean. they hadn't seen each other in twenty years. And FIONA found out that ADRIANA was her daughter only two weeks ago. She couldn't have come to terms with that already, could she? Of course not. At least, I don't think so. So when she comes home and finds JEFFREY and ADRIANA in what looks like a compromising situation, her emotions are going to be more confused than ever."

Levitz took the opportunity to raise a hand and slip some wisdom in sideways. "You got the story outline from the head writer, didn't you?" Camp nodded, part of the chicken salad sandwich crammed in one cheek. "Then you don't have to waste time analyzing what FIONA'S mind might or might not be going through. You just write what Mark *tells* you to write. That's your job. You haven't been hired as some kind of goddam psychiatrist for these fictional characters. You get the continuity from Mark, and you write your scenes. That's all. You can't start winging your characterizations, Sharon, because that will only screw up the other writers. We're all following Mark's outline, and we can't take time to read each other's scenes. If you start dragging one character off into left field, well, it won't fit with what I'm writing for her in *my* assignments."

Camp nodded again, gulping. "I'm



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sorry, Barry, I never thought of it like that. I was just trying to add a little texture to—"

"Forget texture, concentrate on anguish. We're selling anguish. If the housewives want texture, let them read Flaubert." Levitz nodded and drank his coffee. He drank a lot of coffee, even though the commissary made the worst coffee in the Free World. Coffee was one of the most important elements in his life, along with his typewriter. Coffee was fuel and solace, motivator and reward, the breath of life and its punishment all in one. Coffee was more indispensable to a soap opera writer than anything else, including inspiration. It accounted for one of the most remarkable features of all soap operas, not only *Search For Another Doctor:* only two types of things happened on the half hour shows. The first was a genuine plot event, an accident or a wedding or a murder attempt. The second was the meeting of two characters to discuss that event over coffee. A full forty percent of the week's air-time was devoted to one person telling another person what the folks at home had seen already and heard discussed half a dozen other times.

Levitz had balked at this when he had first begun writing scripts. He found it dull and repetitious. "That's the point, Barry," the head writer, Mark Lawrey, had told him then. "The wives can't watch the show every single day, even though they desperately want to. Sometimes real life intrudes. Sometimes they have to go pick up their kids at school, or run to the bank, or take the car in to be fixed, or something. And they miss the show. If the plot moved along in real-time, they'd be lost. We have to make it easy for our regular viewers to go away for a week's vacation, come home, and catch up to what's happening. We can't lose our regular viewers."

"Okay," Levitz had said. He had high hopes then of bringing a new level of literacy and wit to the show, but he was beginning to understand just how limited his job was. That conversation rang now in Levitz's memory, as he regarded Sharon Camp over his cup of coffee. "You'll get the hang of it," he told her.

She smiled wanly. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," she said. He smiled back at her and wondered what FIONA was going to decide while JEFFREY was in the kitchen. The scene was a kind of false lead, setting up a confrontation between FIONA and TODD sometime in the future. Actually, JEFFREY didn't know all the truth; FIONA only believed that he did. Perhaps JEFFREY should give himself away by something he said. Or the doorbell should ring, while he was in the kitchen. That was it! Levitz smiled. The doorbell would ring, the camera would fix on FIONA'S anguished face, and the organ music would swell up and fade into a com-


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mercial. That would get both JEFFREY and Levitz out of the corner, at least until Levitz had to decide who rang the doorbell.

At five o'clock Levitz said goodnight to Camp, ducked into Lawrey's office to see if there were any last-minute ideas or instructions, and left the network's offices. He caught a cab uptown to his apartment on East 91st Street. He stood in his kitchen and looked around, feeling a vague but troublesome dissatisfaction. His apartment consisted of a typical New York kitchen — half a refrigerator shoved under the narrow counter, a small stove with four tiny burners, and enough space for the cockroaches to pass each other without bumping — a meager bathroom, and a large studio that doubled as bedroom and living room. From the windows he had an unobstructed view of the back of the building behind his. There was a large family living in the other building opposite him; they never lowered their blinds, and sometimes Levitz had the feeling that he was watching another soap opera across the air shaft, with the sound turned down. Sometimes they screamed so loud that he wished he could turn it off altogether.

*Search For Another Doctor* had made him dissatisfied. The characters on the show lived in New York, but a different New York than his. Every character had a gigantic apartment, acres of space, with broad, rolling prairies of carpet and rooms opening on rooms forever. And none of them ever seemed to do a lick of housework. He couldn't even imagine FIONA washing dishes or JEFFREY running the vacuum cleaner. Maybe they spent so much time visiting and drinking coffee and shooting at each other that their apartments never got messy. Maybe they ate all their meals in restaurants and slept in the closet or something. Years passed without so much as a newspaper or magazine being added to the sets; didn't these people ever bring something home and toss it on the couch? Levitz did that all the time. Some of the things he'd tossed on his couch months ago were still there, shoved down between the cushions. All sorts of horrible things were fossilizing in strata underneath the furniture; he didn't even want to look at it. Not in the homes of the soap opera characters. They didn't even have dust, let alone mildew. Those characters lived golden lives. Even their light bulbs never burnt out.

Real life couldn't compete with that. That's what accounted for the vast audience and the great ratings; it also accounted for Barry Levitz's high divorce rate. One marriage minus one divorce equals a 100% casualty figure. His own life couldn't hope to resemble what he created for those unreal people. It was bound to affect him emotionally, try as he might to keep it all in perspective. He found himself


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resenting FIONA'S wealth and JEFFREY'S urbanity. He would gladly have moved into TODD and ADRIANA'S bathroom, if he could; it seemed larger than Levitz's entire apartment.

The telephone rang. Levitz reached across and scooped the receiver from its cradle. "Hello?" he said.

"Barry?" It was Marianne, his ex-wife. After all these years she still said "Barry?" as if she expected someone else to have taken over his life. Who else could it be?

"Yeah, honey. What do you want?"

"Barry, listen. I have a little problem, and I was hoping you could help me out."

"Sure, Marianne, maybe. What is it?" He took a deep breath, trying to stay in control. Marianne had her little problems several times a week, and her solution was to call Barry. It generally meant money.

"I was wondering if you could watch Little Barry one day next week? I have to go see my mother." Little Barry was her fox terrier. The name was supposed to be an affectionate joke; Barry hated both it and the dog.

"I guess so," he said. "Which day?"

"I don't know yet, I'll call you and let you know. You know what to do, don't you?"

"Sure," said Levitz, sighing.

"I'll leave the cans of food on the sink. I'll call you tomorrow and tell you what day, all right?"

"Sure, honey. Why do you have to see your mother? I thought she was doing fine."

"Got to run now, Barry. Talk to you tomorrow." There was the slam of a receiver and the loud buzz of the dial tone.

"Hell," murmured Levitz. He hung up the phone. He wondered why he was such a nice guy, such a schlemiel. Why did he let Marianne walk all over him? Guilt? He didn't have any guilt. At least, he didn't think he did.

Levitz had started to make supper — tonight: Cheerios — when the doorbell rang. For a moment he had the horrible notion that it was Marianne, with Little Barry in her arms and a shopping bag filled with cans of dog food. It couldn't be. He opened all the locks on the door except the chain lock and peered out.

"Barry?" It was his best friend, Sammy Baum, who idolized Levitz because he worked for television. On certain occasions, when Levitz wasn't too tired, he didn't mind being idolized. Sammy sounded just like Marianne. "Barry?" *Who else could it be?*

"Hello, Sammy." Levitz undid the chain lock and opened the door.

"You had dinner yet?" asked Baum as he went by.

"Well, I got the sugar on it, but I hadn't poured the milk yet."

"What?" cried Baum. "You write for TV and you eat cereal for dinner?"

Levitz sighed. "I don't like cooking for myself, Sammy. It was different when Marianne was here."


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"I know. I used to cook now and then when Frieda was alive. Now I'd rather just grab something to eat somewhere. Why don't you eat in restaurants, Barry? You can afford it."

Levitz switched on the FM radio. Something that sounded like Mahler came out of it quietly. He sat on the foot of his bed and looked at Baum. "I don't like sitting alone in restaurants, either," he said.

"I know what you mean."

There was silence for a moment, except for the soft music from the radio.

"Why don't we go somewhere and have a good meal," said Baum. "*I'm* depressed, *you're* depressed. It would do us good. I don't want to think about Frieda anymore tonight."

And Levitz didn't want to think about Marianne. Six or seven highballs would take care of that. "All right," he said. "Where?"

"I know a great new Italian place downtown. You'll love it."

"I'm not crazy about Italian food, Sammy."

"Sure you are. Come on."

Levitz was too tired to argue. Anyway, he always ordered steak wherever he went, Italian restaurants, Chinese restaurants, it didn't make any difference. He knew he could trust steaks. He didn't like having to poke around under sauces to find out what he was eating.

They sat for another minute, gathering strength, and then they got up and left the apartment. They rode the elevator down to the foyer; a young woman was waiting there. Her name was Nicki Nichols, and she lived directly above Levitz's apartment. He was used to hearing all kinds of unusual bumping noises from above, at all sorts of strange hours. He was too shy to make inquiry or complain. "Oh," she said breathlessly, "I'm so glad I caught you, Mr. Levitz. Would you sign my petition? I'm trying to get my name on the ballot for councilman."

Levitz exchanged a quick glance with Baum; it was clear that this woman had about as much chance of winning an election as did an unripe melon. "Sure," he said. He scribbled his signature where she indicated.

"Oh, thanks a bunch, Mr. Levitz."

"I've always been very civic-minded," he said.

"You know," said Baum, as they emerged from the building, "if she ends up as mayor of New York, you have no one to blame but yourself." They caught a taxi and rode down through the heavy traffic to Baum's Italian place. Baum ordered veal parm and ravioli; Levitz ordered a steak and baked potato. They finished three drinks each before the food came. They had two more with the meal, and afterward they decided to go somewhere for a couple of drinks. That's where Levitz lost count, and he awakened in his apartment without any knowledge at all of how he



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got there. He was in his bed, twisted up in the sheets, fully clothed. He felt as if he had been crumpled up and tossed in a corner for the night. He was glad that he'd lived in the apartment for so long; he didn't think he was capable of searching for the bathroom. Fortunately, it was where he thought it was. He stood under a hot shower for ten minutes, then remembered that he was awake. In half an hour he had himself dressed to go to work, but not willing in the least. He considered calling in sick — maybe calling in *dead* — but he knew that if he did that one more time, he was courting disaster. There was nothing to do but go downstairs and get into a cab. In the elevator, he congratulated himself on his courage.

This was not the way JEFFREY lived, he thought on the way to work. Characters in soap operas consumed liquor in huge quantities, and they never had hangovers; maybe it was all the coffee. How did they keep their suits pressed, their hair so neat?

At his desk, he slumped and prayed that nothing unusual would happen today. He didn't think he could deal even with changing his typewriter ribbon; if World War III threatened, he'd just as soon be vaporized as have to stumble down to some shelter. He poured his first cup of coffee of the workday and shot a look at Sharon Camp. She was rattling her machine at top speed, creating meaningful relationships out of blank paper. She enjoyed it, Levitz realized. He had once been enthusiastic too, but he'd never *enjoyed* it; you'd have to take the show seriously to do that. His eyes opened wider; it astonished him that someone could take *Search For Another Doctor* seriously. It was even more ludicrous to think that that person might be one of the show's writers. Levitz gave a short, snorting laugh.

Mark Lawrey rushed into the office. "We got a slight hitch," he said.

"Hell," muttered Levitz.

"What kind of hitch?" asked Camp.

Lawrey frowned. "It's Walter Morrison." Morrison was the talent who played DR. KEITH BEAUMONT on the show. He was one of the biggest stars on daytime television.

"He's holding out for more money," said Levitz. "His contract's up for renewal."

"Uh huh," said Lawrey. "He's being completely unrealistic. You should hear his demands. Who does he think he is, Robert De Niro or something? He's asking for too much money, and they're not going to go along with it."

"They have to," said Camp. "They can't let Morrison go. He's been with the show fifteen years."

There was a sudden hush in the office. Levitz smiled without humor. They were going to have to get rid of DR. KEITH BEAUMONT. Suddenly. It was going to take a massive re-structuring of Lawrey's continuity. "Is this for sure?" asked Levitz.

"We'll find out later today," said


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Lawrey. "They're meeting with him right now. We'll get the word before lunchtime."

"We're going to write Morrison's part out of the show?" asked Camp. "They won't replace him?"

"No," said Lawrey, "he *is* DR. KEITH BEAUMONT. And the producers are taking a hard line. If we found another actor for the part, it would be leaving the part open for Morrison, if he wanted to come back in the future. Killing the character, one of the *main* characters, is a message to the other actors. We won't have anyone trying to hold up the producers for more money, not after this."

"How do we do it?" asked Camp.

Lawrey grinned. "I've already got the glimmer of a wonderful idea. I'll come in later. You just get back to work. You may have to revise what you're writing, in light of future developments. I'll let you know as soon as I get the word from the money people."

Levitz shrugged. He'd been through this before with other talent, but never with such a popular character as DR. BEAUMONT.

An hour passed while Levitz worked on a scene between ADRIANA and SUMMER, a former prostitute who was now JEFFREY'S secretary, and who was carrying a baby she suspected had been fathered by QUINN, TODD'S younger brother. It was the first in a series of scenes that would lay the groundwork for a new story line; Lawrey had planned for QUINN to kill SUMMER accidently, yet be tried for murder. It would take a long time for him to clear his name. While Levitz wrestled with the third version of the scene — the two women were having coffe in SUMMER'S palatial apartment — the head writer interrupted again.

"It's all settled," said Lawrey.

"Good," said Camp. "Did Morrison agree to the network's terms, or did the producers come up with the money he was asking for?"

"Neither; BEAUMONT goes. As soon as possible. There was no talk about replacing Morrison with another actor."

Levitz had supposed that Morrison would back down. "This might be fun," he said. "How are we going to do it?"

Lawrey flashed his satisfied grin. He really enjoyed tormenting these poor characters. "Well, DR. KEITH BEAUMONT has been the sterling hero and romantic idol of this show since it started. He's saved more lives and uncovered more schemes than all the rest of the characters put together."

"Nobody has a motive to kill him," said Levitz thoughtfully.

"A terrible accident?" asked Camp.

Lawrey shook his head. "Here's what we're going to do: we're going to tie up all three of the current stories at once. Wait, just listen to me; I don't think this has ever been done



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before. We're going to turn BEAUMONT into a monster. All these years, you see, *he's* the one behind every evil thing that's happened in the community. Everybody has always thought of him as good old Doc, but the truth is that he's pinned the rap for his crimes on a dozen other people. It was BEAUMONT who killed TODD'S father. It was BEAUMONT who stole the bearer bonds from FIONA, not MARTIN. And so forth. We're going to learn all of this in the course of two weeks. You're going to have to work it into the current stories. I suppose BEAUMONT is the father of SUMMER'S baby, come to think of it. You get the idea."

"Wow," said Levitz.

Lawrey nodded. "It's going to take a couple of days for me to work it out on paper, so you just go ahead with what you've been assigned. We may just have to postpone those scenes until after this business is over."

"We're going to write him right out of existence," said Levitz, relishing the idea.

"How will it end?" asked Camp.

"I see a big party," said Lawrey. "Some occasion, I don't know exactly what, with almost the whole cast assembled at his apartment. Someone will try to rob him, a masked burglar in a black outfit, see, and the burglar will break into BEAUMONT'S hidden wall-safe. Along with the stocks and bonds and jewelry, there will be his secret journal. BEAUMONT is such an egotistic maniac that he's documented every one of his crimes. The journal will be made public at the party, and somebody will put a bullet through his head. Or else he'll do it himself. Now that I think about it, I like that better; he'll commit suicide on the air."

"So who's in the black mask?" asked Levitz.

"I don't know yet," said Lawrey. "That will start an entirely new story."

"I love it," said Camp. "I can't wait to start working on it. I hope I get to write the suicide scene."

"Sorry," said Lawrey, "I'm writing that one myself."

"He always takes the plums for himself before he divides up the pie," said Levitz. Lawrey went back into his office, Camp hammered at her typewriter, and Levitz returned to ADRIANA and SUMMER. He realized that this scene would have to be redone after the BEAUMONT affair was finished. All the relationships on the show would change, and it was too early to predict just how. Levitz was paid to write, and he was diligent enough to hang around until five o'clock turning out anguish that might never be used. He had an almost inexhaustible supply of anguish.

At quitting time he walked to the elevators with Sharon Camp. The middle elevator dinged and slid open its doors. "Are you in a hurry tonight?" she asked. "I thought we might have a couple of drinks, and you could tell me how we're going to bump off DR. BEAUMONT."

Levitz sighed. "I'd love to, Sharon,


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but I have to get home. My ex-wife will be calling me with urgent news. I have to feed her damn dog for a couple of days while she goes out of town."

"Oh. Well, maybe tomorrow, then."

"Sure," said Levitz, "tomorrow after work. We'll get smashed and I'll make a pass at you."

Camp giggled uncomfortably. "Great." They got into the elevator and rode down in silence. Levitz was aware that he had said something wrong. They said goodbye to each other on the sidewalk, Camp heading downtown, Levitz in the opposite direction.

The telephone was ringing when he opened the door to his apartment. He rushed in and grabbed it, expecting to hear Marianne's Brooklyn accent. "Hello," he said.

"Levitz?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"This is Walter Morrison. Listen, Levitz, I hear you people are gloating over my leaving the show."

Levitz held the phone and stared out at the grimy building across the air shaft. "We're not gloating, Walter," he said.

"I hear you just can't wait to kill me off. You're practically fighting each other for the privilege."

"That's not true, Walter. Anyway, it isn't anything personal. Look at it from a writer's point of view; it's a marvelous opportunity, a challenge. It's something completely new for the show. It has nothing to do with how we feel about you."

"How *do* you feel about me?"

"We've always gotten along, Walter."

"Well, be careful, Levitz. I'm not happy about this situation at all. I'll catch on with another soap easily enough; my agent has already had a couple of tentative inquiries. So if this is my grand farewell to the show, you damn well better make me look good. It had better be some masterful piece of writing."

"Talk to Mark about that, Walter. He's reserving it for himself."

"The hell with Lawrey. I'm holding *you* responsible." Morrison hung up suddenly. Levitz held the receiver, listening to the cold, dead dial tone. He realized that lately he'd been doing just that fairly often.

There was a knock at the door. "Barry?"

"Just a minute, Sammy." Levitz did not feel up to carousing around the town with his neighbor; he'd just gotten over the previous night's hangover. He went to the door and unlocked it.

Baum came in and sat on the couch. "What's new?" he said.

Levitz just wished Baum would go away. He didn't want to have a friendly conversation, either. He wanted to collapse on the bed and take a little nap. "Nothing much," he said.

"I was almost killed today," said


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Baum. He seemed flushed with excitement.

"Oh, really?" Levitz didn't have the energy to respond with amazement.

"Uh huh. Somebody accidentally knocked a flower pot off a window ledge, and it smashed up right next to me on the sidewalk. Right downstairs. You can still see where it hit."

New York, New York, it's a wonderful town, thought Levitz. "So you were really lucky, Sammy. You have an angel looking out for you."

"So far, anyway." He reached out and knocked on the coffee table, which only appeared to be wooden.

"So," said Levitz.

"I thought we'd go out and celebrate life and have a few drinks."

"Not tonight, Sammy. I got to wait for Marianne to call."

"Oh, okay. Maybe tomorrow, if another flower pot doesn't fall out of the sky and kill me. Or you."

Levitz laughed grimly. "I won't get it from a flower pot," he said confidently. "The universe has something special planned for me, I'm sure." The image of Walter Morrison with his hands around Levitz's neck occurred to him.

Baum got up and walked slowly toward the door. "I guess I'll just go out and round up some supper," he said.

"Uh huh," said Levitz, closing the door in Baum's face. As he slid the chain lock home, the telephone rang again. "I'm so damned popular," he murmured.

It was Marianne, of course. "I'm leaving tonight, honey," she said. "I'm only going to be gone until the day after tomorrow. You have to feed Little Barry tomorrow morning and tomorrow night and again the next morning. That's three times, okay?"

"Sure, Marianne, I think I can handle it."

"I'll leave the cans—"

"— on the sink. I know. Have a good time at your mother's, and don't worry."

There was a short silence. "Okay, now, I'm counting on you. You still have the keys?"

Levitz sighed. "Yes, Marianne. Say hello to your mother for me, if she remembers who I am."

"God, Barry, she isn't *that* bad yet."

"Okay. I'll talk to you the day after tomorrow."

Marianne hung up in her usual vehement manner. Levitz let out his breath and stood up, stretching and yawning. He wanted a nap, and he realized how hungry he was. He tried to decide if he was more tired or hungry; it was a toss-up. He settled on making a quick supper and then sleeping for an hour or two. He was on the way to the kitchen to see what he had in the refrigerator when there was another knock on the door. He prayed to God that it wasn't Sammy Baum again.

He was pleasantly surprised to see



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that it was Nicki Nichols. "Come on in," he said.

"Thank you," she said. She looked as if she'd been crying.

"How's your petition doing?"

"I kind of had to give it up. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, sort of, Mr. Levitz."

He led her into the living room. "Would you like some coffee, Nicki?"

She waved a hand. "Do you remember a couple of months ago when I was so drunk and I couldn't get into my apartment and you let me sleep it off here?"

That had been a very strange night. "Uh huh," he said.

"Well," she said, glancing around for some source of strength, "well, I went to the doctor today and ... and he said—"

Levitz felt a cold chill. He thought he knew what she was trying to tell him.

Nichols continued in her stammering way. "He said that I ... I might be going to have—"

Mercifully, Levitz raised a hand and cut her off. "Take it easy, Nicki, I understand. But why are you telling me all of this?"

Her eyes got bigger. "Because ... I've never had that ... kind of relationship with a man. I mean, I must have, but I don't remember even who the man was or where—"

Levitz's chill turned colder. "Are you suggesting that you think *I* might be that man?"

Tears streamed down her pretty face. "It seems like ... like the only possible...." Her voice trailed off.

Levitz reached out to touch her arm, but she flinched away. "I can promise you, Nicki, that it wasn't me. You were very drunk, and you had no idea where you'd been or with whom, and I let you sleep here. I slept on the couch. In the morning we had the super let you back into your apartment. Nothing else happened."

"But if that's true—"

"I promise you it's true, Nicki."

"— then who ... who...."

Levitz closed his eyes and felt awful. This was real anguish, all right. "I can't tell you that, Nicki. I'm sorry you have to go through this, but if you need anybody to talk to, or if I can do anything at all, please call me." He urged her slowly toward the door. He decided that he didn't want a nap any longer; he wanted to get drunk and forget everybody's problems.

"Thank you, Mr. Levitz," Nichols whispered. "You're very kind. I guess I have a lot of thinking to do."

"Yes, I guess so. Everything will work out fine, you'll see."

He had managed to get her out the door, into the hall. She turned and looked at him with her huge, reddened eyes. "But who?"

"I don't know Nicki. Maybe you'll never know."

She nodded tearfully; Levitz closed the door behind her. It looked like her run for the councilman's seat had



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been temporarily abandoned.

Levitz made himself some coffee. He poured a cup and sat down by the television. Some new situation comedy was on, something he'd never seen or heard before; he sipped his coffee and stared at the screen. Everybody had a story, he thought. This is the goddamn Naked City, and there are eight million boring, repetitive stories.

The next morning at work, Sharon Camp came over to his desk. "Can I speak to you for a moment, Barry?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, sure. I was just writing the scene with TODD and ADRIANA'S baby. It might not actually be theirs, after all. What's up?"

She looked uncomfortable. "Let's get some coffee."

Uh oh, thought Levitz. He followed Camp downstairs to the commissary, instead of just getting a cup of coffee from the pot on the hotplate. They sat opposite each other; they were almost alone in the large room.

"I told Mark about what you said yesterday," she said.

Levitz stared at her. "What *did* I say yesterday?" he asked.

"You know," she said blushing. "About making a pass at me. That's sexual harrassment. Mr. Levitz. I can't work with you if you insist on seeing me as that kind of object."

Levitz didn't even remember making the remark. He was stunned; if Sharon Camp believed he thought of her as a sex object, she was giving herself too much credit. Levitz's true opinion of her was that she'd make a terrific model for a Henry Moore sculpture: tiny head, big bottom.

She continued. "Mark said I should confront you with this. He said you should apologize. I'd like to have the apology in writing, just for the record."

"Sharon," he said, "you're blowing this up out of proportion. I was not the tiniest bit serious about what I said. It was just a casual, conversational thing. I promise you, I don't think of you in any other way than as a friendly, hard-working fellow writer."

Camp looked as if she were going to begin crying. "Then why did you say it? Nobody's *ever* said anything like that to me."

That was easy for Levitz to believe. "I promise you I won't, ever again. All right?"

"Fine," she said. "Just write that out and sign it, and make a copy for Mark, too."

More than anything else in the whole world, Levitz wanted to punch her in the face. He smiled. "Sure, Sharon," he said. Then he got up and went back to his desk. She would be lucky if he ever addressed another word to her.

Later in the morning, Mark Lawrey crossed through their office to get a


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cup of coffee. Levitz looked up. "Mark," he said, "I got a good idea this morning. About TODD and ADRIANA'S baby."

Lawrey frowned. "Good," he said. "I was beginning to think that we should do something more with that. Grab a cup yourself and come back to my office. Let's talk."

A minute later, while both men sipped their coffee, Levitz realized that it hadn't been coincidence or a strong desire for coffee that had brought Lawrey by Levitz's desk. "I have some bad news for you, Barry," said the head writer.

Levtiz closed his eyes for a moment and prayed for mercy. "What is it?" he said.

"We're letting you go. Now, it isn't that I'm not happy with your work. But the producers feel it's the best thing for the show. It started with Walter Morrison leaving. They want the show to head into a new area, to attract a younger audience. They're going to pep the stories up with more violence and sex and who knows what. They're going to add a fantasy element, too, and I've fought against that for the last six months. I might be looking for a job myself in a few weeks."

The coffee was worse than usual. Levitz sat his cup down on Lawrey's desk, not caring if it would leave a ring on the stack of papers. "How hard did you fight them about firing me?" he asked.

"I complained, all right," said Lawrey. "I said that you had seniority here, and they countered that with their feeling that Sharon fit better with their future plans for the show."

"Is that right? Does this have anything to do with that goddamn sexual harrassment complaint of hers?"

Lawrey fidgeted in his chair. "No, Barry, I don't think so. I'm glad, in a way, that I'm firing you, because I really didn't want to have to deal with that complaint. I know you, and I know her. I can imagine what the real situation must have been like."

"Do you?" Levitz stood up angrily. "Great. Then I can leave here without everyone thinking I'm some kind of sex maniac. I'll go clean out my desk."

"Barry—"

Levitz glared at him. "The hell with it, Mark," he said, and walked out.

It wan't even lunchtime, but for Levitz the day was shot. It felt strange to go home in the middle of the morning. Now that he was unemployed, he took the subway instead of a cab.

He got off the subway four stops before his own, because he had forgotten to feed the damn dog that morning. He unlocked Marianne's front door; the dog came running, but when it saw Levitz, not its mistress, it stopped and began to growl softly in its throat. "Just going to open a can and get the hell out of here," said Levitz. He knew the ani-


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mal was just itching to bite him. He decided to give Little Barry both cans now, and then he wouldn't have to come back in the evening. He finished that chore in less that three minutes, and another minute later he was outside again, walking toward the subway stop.

Now what? he wondered, Ought to go file for unemployment. Ought to get something to eat. Ought to just sit in a bar and get smashed. To Levitz, from his perspective at the bottom of the pits, his life seemed in tatters. What more could happen?

There was a gentleman waiting on the steps of his apartment building. Levitz glanced at him and dismissed his as a salesman. "Pardon me," said the man.

"Yes?" said Levitz, a slight edge to his voice to indicate that he was not a man to trifle with.

"Do you live in this building?"

"Yes," said Levitz impatiently.

"I'm supposed to meet the tenant in 2-C. You don't happen to live on the second floor, do you? I'm thinking of subletting that apartment."

"I don't even know who lives in 2-C. I live on the fourth floor."

"Ah," said the man. "It wouldn't be 4-C, would it? Because if you'd let me just take a peek, I could get an idea of what 2-C looks like."

"No, I'm very sorry, I live in 4-A."

The man smiled. "Then you would be Mr. Barry Levitz?"

Oops, thought Levitz. "Yes," he said.

"Then this is for you." The man slapped a paper in Levitz's hand and walked quickly away. Barry had never been served a summons before, and he rather admired the way the man had engineered the whole encounter. Feeling a bit bewildered, Levitz looked at the paper. Translating from the legalese, it seemed that Nicki Nichols (whose real first name was apparently Imojean) had filed a paternity suit against him. "Swell," muttered Levitz. "Just great. I wonder what my horoscope looks like today." Needless to say, it was a slow and lonely ride up in the elevator to his apartment.

Home at last, Levitz tried to calm himself: "People get fired every day. It's no big deal. Just the way Walter Morrison will go to work for another show, so will I. And this paternity suit. One blood test will do for it." He hoped.

He felt like a character on *Search For Another Doctor,* and a minor character, at that. He felt like talking over his problems with SUMMER, the former prostitute. He liked the way she wore her eye makeup.

That thought gave him a bizarre idea. He picked up the telephone and called Mark Lawrey's number. "Hello," said Lawrey.

"Mark," said Levitz, "don't say a word until I'm finished. I want you to tell me if you're alone in your office right now."

"No, I'm not."

"Good," said Levitz. "Who's with


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you? Talent?"

"No."

"One of the writers?"

"Yes."

"Sharon Camp?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"And you're both drinking coffee, aren't you? I'd bet ten bucks that you're drinking coffee."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything? I drink coffee all day long."

"Nothing, Mark, nothing. Really. I was just doing an informal survey."

"You're crazy, you know that? And don't bother me again. You may need psychiatric attention, Levitz." There came the ringing thud of a receiver slammed down hard.

Levitz remembered that it was Sammy Baum's day off, and he went down the hall and knocked on Baum's door. A moment later Baum appeared. "Barry!" he said. "What are you doing home this time of day?"

"Special reward for services rendered," said Levitz. "Can I come in?"

Well, uh, Barry, uh—"

"Busy? Never mind, Sammy, I'll come back later."

"No, Barry, uh, it isn't that. Oh, come on in." He stood away from the door, and Levitz saw that Baum was not alone. There was a young woman sitting at one end of Baum's hideous maroon couch.

It was Nicki Nichols, naturally. "Hello, Imojean," said Levitz, amazed that he wasn't angry or bitter.

She was shy or embarrassed or guilty; she wouldn't meet his gaze. "Hello, Mr. Levitz."

He smiled at both of them. "Having coffee?" he asked.

"There's some left in the pot, if you'd like a cup," said Baum.

"Oh, no. Somehow I just knew you'd be having coffee. I just wanted to see if I was right. Well, got to run. You kids enjoy yourselves. I'll come by later, Sammy." Levitz headed back for his own apartment, feeling a peculiar light-headed euphoria.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully; it was almost a let-down. Levitz expected at least two more personal misfortunes and a natural disaster before midnight. He watched a couple of movies on television, warmed up a can of soup, and read the first few chapters of a novel by some new writer who could really write; it said so on the dust jacket. None of the people in that book drank coffee. They all drank white wine.

In the morning he toyed with the idea of forgetting about Little Barry, but Marianne would be home that evening and she'd see the leftover can of dog food. After feeding the dog, Levitz considered how best to spend this Thursday. He ended up riding out to Shea Stadium to see the first baseball game of his life. He drank two quarts of beer and fell asleep in the fifth inning. He never found out who won the game, but ended up with a dandy sunburn. He rode home on the subway



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with a splitting headache. His telephone was ringing as he unlocked the door to his apartment. He ran for it.

It was Marianne. "Barry?"

"Yes, damn it, it's Barry. Are you home?"

"Stay where you are, Barry. Don't go anywhere. I called the police and they'll be right over."

"What are you talking about, Marianne?"

She sounded hysterical. "You know damn well what I'm talking about, you filth! Little Barry's lying here stiff as a board, poisoned!" Her phone slammed down.

Levitz stood still for a moment, blinking, trying to understand what had happened. He called Marianne's number. "He was all right this morning," he said.

"Of course he was! *Why,* Barry, why? I never thought you could do something like this!"

"Why do you think *I* did it?"

"No one else could have gotten in. You're a monster, Barry, some kind of sick monster passing himself off as a lovable slob. What other things have you done, Barry? What other horrible things have you done?"

Levitz beat her to it; he hung up angrily. There was a knock on the door. It's Sammy, thought Levitz; that's his cue.

"Mr. Levitz? Open up, this is the police. We know you're in there, Levitz."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He wished he had time to make himself a cup of coffee. He unlocked the locks and swung open the door. He was sure that the family across the air shaft was watching all the activity with wide-eyed fascination.

"That's him, officer," cried Sammy Baum. "That's the man! That's Levitz, all right!"

"What's the problem, officer?" asked Levitz with a brief smile. He wanted to appear reasonable and cooperative.

"This man here says you dropped a flower pot that almost killed him," said a cop. "He recognized the plant as one of his own, and you're the only other person around here with keys to all the locks on his door. Even the building super doesn't have all the keys."

"But—" tried Levitz.

"We'd just like to ask you a few questions, Mr. Levitz," said a second policeman. They urged him along the hall. There was a crowd of people gathered by the elevator, drawn by the noise and the excitement. For a moment, Levitz thought among the leering faces he saw Walter Morrison's. Why would Morrison be there? To document another treacherous victory in his secret journal?

One of the cops grabbed Levitz and pushed him against the wall; the other swiftly locked Levitz's wrists in cuffs.

LEVITZ: What's that for? You don't need to—



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1st COP: That's enough. You have the right to remain—

SAMMY: Get him out of here before I brain him myself!

*(Shot of crowd. Slow pan from left to right, pausing on the face of DR. KEITH BEAUMONT. DR. BEAUMONT is laughing, evidently enjoying the spectacle.)*

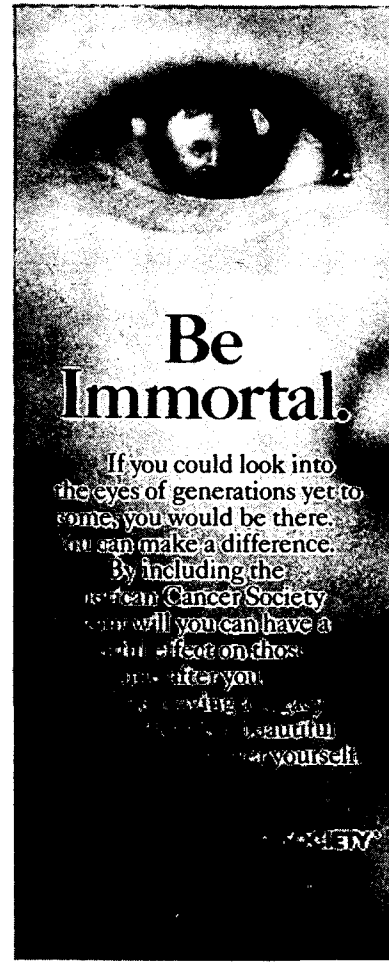
1st COP: —one will be appointed for you by the court.

LEVITZ: Get that man! Get *him*! He's the one who did all of this, it'll all be written down in his secret journal! *(LEVITZ pauses and his eyes open wider as the truth of the situation dawns on him.)* My God, this is just what we planned for *him*! Somehow he's managed to turn it all around! He's written me out of my own life!

2nd COP: I hate these looney ones, Mike, don't you?

1st COP: When we're done with him, let's knock off and get some coffee.

*(Freeze on LEVITZ'S anguished face. Organ music up and over. Slow fade to black. Roll end titles.)*



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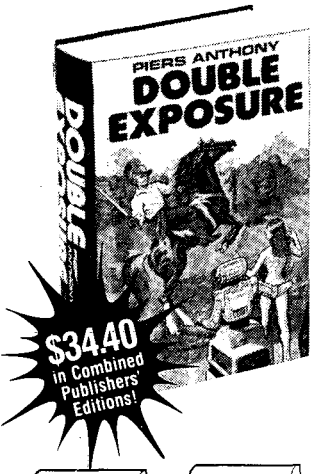


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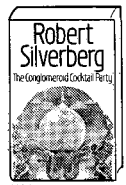


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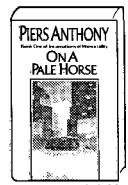


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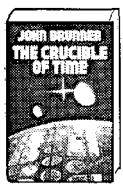


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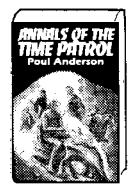


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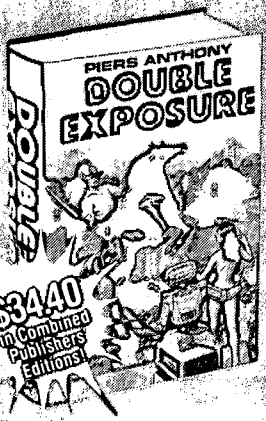


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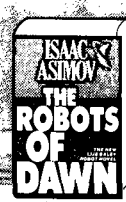


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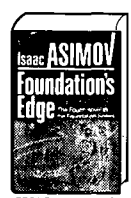


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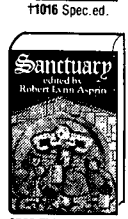


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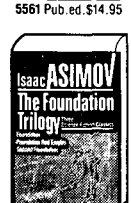


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